

kaleidoscope by aelescribe

Category: IT (Movies - Muschietti), IT - Stephen King

Genre: Adult Eddie Kaspbrak, Daddy Issues, Eddie Kaspbrak Lives, Frank Kaspbrak's Actual A+ Parenting, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, Internalized Homophobia, Losers Club (IT) Friendship, M/M, Parallel Universes, Slow Burn, Sonia Kaspbrak's A+ Parenting, Stanley Uris Lives, Time Travel Fix-It, Young Eddie Kaspbrak, frank is MY City Now, idiots to lovers, the father the son and the holy kaspbrak, they are two different characters

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Summary:

Richie remembers the details so vividly, knows every scuff of his sneakers intimately and knows the injury of his right arm, bent at that odd angle, had to have just happened. Eddie is just as he remembers him on that summer day in Neibolt; then and not now, but now he's-- here.

Richie does the only thing Richie can do: laughs.

[Eddie, 1989; Richie, 2016; and their collision.]

1. ferry

Summary for the Chapter:

Bill resurfaces and the figure in his arms is so small
Richie's heart shrinks. "It's a k-k-id," Bill gasps out.

"I thought we were done with this shit," Richie
repeats louder.

When Richie gets his glasses back, he keeps them in hand, letting
dirty water lap the lenses. Over and over he traces the cracked glass
with his thumb. As if he does that enough times it will heal. As if he
does this enough times it'll change anything.

Richie lets the worried glances of his friends roll off him like beads of
sweat. He can barely afford to keep himself composed, much less
extend that attention to others. He doesn't want them to look at him
like he's going to shatter because even such fragile eyes will be too
much. He could combust on a sigh, fingertips on his shoulder.

His friends are swimming somewhere behind him. Reflecting. Richie
can hardly see himself in the dirty water and is grateful. He's too
disgusted with himself to witness his own image. He's suffering now
and can't see himself begin to heal for the world. And the rest of the
losers are his world and--he honestly can't see getting out of this.

They'll keep going. The world will keep turning without him.
Without *him*. Richie feels stuck. Stuck at thirteen, stuck in love, stuck
in the moment that spattered hot blood on his cheek and glasses.

Richie could sit in this dirty water forever. As soon as he puts these
glasses back on, he has to face the world as he has never before. As
he did for twenty seven years, but he didn't know what he was
missing--hindsight will only depress him. The life Richie could have
had. And fuck, having him here wouldn't fix everything, but he
wouldn't be so terrified because he wasn't alone.

Even the rest of his friends can't make him feel less alone. Pennywise
tore out a piece of Richie's own heart when It tore through--

Fuck, he thinks. “Fuck,” Richie chokes into his free hand, desperately drilling the sound into his palm. He can’t take anymore well meaning hands on his shoulder or arms around his middle.

Richie got to say goodbye to Stan, in a way. But, he supposes, there was no amount of closure that would make things okay. Ever again.

He can’t remember ever crying this much in his whole life. Can’t recall ever feeling this much. The last three decades were just a meandering pause. Like everything stopped when he was thirteen, frozen in Neibolt, bells jangling as Pennywise crept *closer* and Richie only hearing *screams*, tried to give some solace, some last bit of hope because he couldn’t let his best friend die looking at *that thing*, his last image had to be something good, something worth it, he deserved to look at someone who cared in those last moments of terror.

And Richie, patting his own back, had then believed he was worth enough to be the last thing Eddie saw.

Richie's hands were gentle and small, not like the gloved hands that suffocated Eddie’s mouth, hot and cloying and *sour*. They were searching for something in those deep brown eyes. Richie held the world in his hands. *His* world, his Eddie. And this was as much for Richie as it was for Eddie. Richie couldn’t go without him. They were in this together. And even as everyone screamed and screamed and *screamed* in that moment, Eddie quieted, breath caught in his throat, reading Richie’s eyes and understanding. The world stopped around the two of them. It was just Richie. Just Eddie.

Never just Eddie, but nothing else mattered so much.

Just rotted wood beneath their feet. Under Richie’s palm. R plus E.

And how did he go out? Alone. Richie left him to bleed out against a slab of concrete and rot in the catacombs, float with all the other bits and pieces of children and history from centuries of depravity.

Then, Richie supposed, this punishment was only fair. Richie could spend the rest of his life miserable because he’d given Eddie a miserable death.

The water stills besides the cycle of his thumb. It's then he realizes his friends have stopped moving, but he hasn't seen them leave the water. No one's rushed to comfort his crying, and he wonders if he's grateful. Maybe they're going to play a prank, try and scare him to raise his spirits, or make him curse, yell at them, laugh, do or say anything that isn't sitting in silence and adoring what he can no longer see once he puts those glasses back on.

Richie turns and sees the four of his friends frozen still. He follows their lines of sight up to the top of the quarry where they jumped just now, but centuries ago.

The dot at the top of the quarry doesn't draw attention like it should. That image is disconnected from the splash Richie hears moments later and tries to piece it together. His blurry vision isn't helping. Until Bill is shouting, diving ahead of the rest, he doesn't even realize it's a person.

"I thought we were done with this shit," Richie hisses and slaps on his glasses. Lakewater batters his vision. What more could be done after killing Pennywise? What other ridiculous, tragic event still has yet to happen in Derry? He can't be ready for what's to happen. His empathy died in the Neibolt house.

Bill resurfaces and the figure in his arms is so small Richie's heart shrinks. "It's a k-k-id," Bill gasps out. Mike is at his side, guiding them back to shore, keeping Bill steady and trying to rouse the figure in his arms.

Bev is quick to Richie's side, Ben too, first just watching Mike and Bill take the child to shore.

"I thought we were done with this shit," Richie repeats louder. Bev gives him a glance. If it sounds like he's chastising the child for falling, fine. He can't help being wary. Any monster could lurk beneath baby blues. That kid isn't any safer than the Pomeranian he and--

No. Richie can't think of that, now. The memory is enough to catch in his throat and stop words, only a disconcerted sound escapes in place of the agony boiling his lungs. It's too recent. Everything is too

much. Somehow, the only memory he can place that doesn't cut an artery is the moment he knew they were going to die in that house. The peace that washed over them because they were together, even if it was horrible. That didn't make things okay. But it made it bearable.

Richie shouldn't fixate on that memory, the calmness of death, but he knew then that he wouldn't have to live in a world without Eddie. He can't imagine going on with life as is.

Bev watches him closely, takes his hand, and squeezes. It doesn't help, but it's *Bev*, so it does. He returns her wan smile with a nod; the effort it takes to curl his lips seems impossible. If he tries, his mouth will shrivel and teeth will grit to keep all his sadness from spilling out.

The rest of them keep a safe distance. Bill performs compressions. Richie recognizes the alarm in Mike's face from the shore. There's caution and hope there, but as the other three begin to approach, he wards them off with a hand. "Don't come any closer," Mike insists.

Richie tries to combat this distance, turning to Ben and Bev. "What did you guys--see, what, did it *fall* or jump--"

"He... wasn't pushed," is all Ben can offer, rubbing his eyes, trying to believe the sight in front of him. As if this is the most taxing image to grace his eyes today. The endless empathy Ben exudes is something Richie envies, and can't understand after all they've been through.

But then, Richie's notoriously selfish.

"Careful with that fucking thing," Richie calls warily to Bill and Bev shushes him.

"It's a kid, Richie," she says, but her gaze is equally wary. "It can't... *that child* can't hurt us."

"Oh yeah? Then why does it feel like my wish of beating the shit out of a middle schooler as a grown man is finally being granted?"

Ben snorts despite the situation, timed with a wet gasp as the kid coughs his lungs onto the shore. To their surprise, Mike ushers him over. Bill glances worriedly over his shoulder, perhaps hearing

Richie's commentary.

"What the hell," Richie calls back. "Do I get to punch him or what? Why does Ben get the first swing? Lemme at 'im!"

Bill is looking at Bev, and it only clicks when she fastens her fingers around his wrist to keep Richie in place.

"I'm not--actually," Richie mutters. "Pussies. Can't take a joke."

"Just wait, Richie," Bev insists patiently, following whatever logic Bill insists. "It's okay. Let's wait."

Bill supports the youngster's back and eases him up on the beach. Richie still can't get a good look at him and the, no doubt, dozens of teeth he has lying in the back of his throat, waiting to spring since these idiots have let their guard down. Richie isn't going to let anyone else die on his watch just because they fell for It. He won't make that mistake again.

Bev senses his intent and doesn't let him go, but follows him closely. Their splashing through the water draws Mike's attention and he insists, "Stay back, Rich."

"Why? You think I'll let you get speared, too?" And it slips out when it shouldn't have, Ben takes a heavy step forward to meet Bev and Richie at the shore. Hurt flashes palpably across Mike's face and Richie wants to beg to take it back. "No I, fuck, *Mike* --"

"That's not it, Richie." Ben steadies his hands on Richie's shoulders, slowly, laying comfort on a wounded animal. He doesn't realize how tense he is until Ben's thumbs are rubbing circles under his shoulder blades and the fight starts flowing out of him. Richie gives a sigh and he wonders for the nth time that week *why* he couldn't have had a crush on Ben instead. An easy heartbreak on all accounts.

"Your boyfriend's trying to seduce me," Richie singsongs to Bev. Ben snorts but doesn't loosen his grip. "It's working."

Bev steps around him, rolling her eyes, then stops cold in the sand. He watches every part of her tense, toes to the top of her head.

“Has it eaten Bill’s face yet?” Richie calls out. He’s met with resounding silence. There’s no use in desensitizing him. Is anyone going to tell him what the fuck is happening?

He wrestles his way out of Ben’s grip *Richie no*, then there’s another hand on his arm *Richie stop*, trying to grab his wrist *Richie wait*, someone’s pulling him back *Richie honey* and he’s sick of them trying to keep him from everything. Richie is horribly aware of the sound of his own voice, and no one else’s, spinning and spitting words because he has to fill the empty space his best friend left.

Yet he can’t form two syllables, Eddie, and they won’t stop saying *Richie, Richie, Richie* and he’s sick of hearing it sick of hearing himself because *Richie it’s okay* and *Richie you’re alive* and *Richie we did it* isn’t fucking enough.

Richie drags his feet onto the beach to get a look at the little shit that’s causing all this trouble,. Damp clothes cling to summer skin, his shorts reflecting the sun. The kid is shivering, but that could be a ruse. He’s supported, back steadied with Bill’s hand, Mike on his other side. Richie meets his eyes with an apology and Mike, lips set in a firm line, nods and accepts with grace.

But he still watches Richie warily, as if he’ll snap now the same way he did in the restaurant. Richie’s got a short fuse when it comes to being fucked with. Especially when It has something to do with it.

Richie’s about to say something more formal when he gets a look at the dark hair swept across the kid’s face. He’s breathing, coughing, starting up. He lifts his left hand to brush back damp bangs, the other arm dangling helplessly at his side. Perhaps injured from the fall.

Maybe this is really just some stupid fucking kid that Richie’s losing his shit over nothing again. If it’s real, it’s a welcome distraction.

But then Richie gets a look at his eyes. Deep brown, terrified but determined, two earthen beads seared into his mind when Pennywise dragged Its claws across the earth, eager to sink them into young flesh and drag them deep beneath, giving them so much distance to float back up. Seconds before Bev *speared* It. Before It shrunk away in defeat. Before they branded *Lover* on *his* wound.

The faded sage tee, the khaki shorts, the socks rolled up past his ankles. Days ago it was mist in his mind. But now, Richie remembers the details so vividly, knows every scuff of his sneakers intimately and knows the injury of his right arm, bent at that odd angle, had to have *just happened*.

Eddie is just as he remembers him on that summer day in Neibolt; then and not now, but now he's-- *here*.

Richie does the only thing Richie can do: laughs.

He laughs until his stomach hurts, unable to stop, even as Eddie shrinks away in fear, clearly and completely disoriented by his surroundings. Richie guffaws because, after everything that's happened, and anything that could, this is the funniest possible thing. Even he couldn't think something this fucked up.

And if this is It's doing... Pennywise got him. And the last fucking laugh.

Richie's quiets, petering out into giggles and shaking shoulders. Everyone is still staring at him, staring at Eddie, *little Eddie*. "Aw, fuck," he manages. The next chuckle turns into vomit all over Eddie's shoes.

Eddie's chest heaves and with a great jerk, his head flops back and he passes out.

And that starts Richie's laughter all over again.

Notes for the Chapter:

this is going to be adhering to the movie verse for the most part. ill try and remain very in line with the characters as presented (though ive never written them before). other than that it's time travel so some liberties will be taken. but you don't care about that, you care about filling the hole inside you that andy muschietti carved out while bill hader was yelling gay rights in the background!!!!

it's been a while since i've written a fic because

college is keeping me sufficiently busy, but i couldn't
NOT write about these idiots. i love them so much.
thanks for coming along for the ride :)

2. defer

Summary for the Chapter:

“We left him in that hellhole. Remember? Or was I the only one not on board for that?”

Bill scoops up unconscious Eddie--little Eddie, the Eddie that Richie remembers most vividly--and hightails it back to the town house. He's careful, constantly adjusting his hold, not needing Rich to chime in, knowing exactly where is safe to touch Eddie, and how to handle him, because he doesn't like being touched and they're strangers to him, even if he isn't awake those boundaries need to be respected.

But Bill knows and if there's anyone Richie's going to put his faith in, it's him.

He keeps staring at Eddie's sleeping face--not pained, except for when his arm gets bumped. No cast, but it's broken. Like it was. Eddie is just like he was in his memories. But--here. Richie can't wrap his head around it.

He lets his eyes wander over the freckles that dot Eddie's face. If this is a trick, a clone, a copy, it's a good one--every single freckle is in its proper place. Richie refuses to get any closer than his gaze will allow, if only not to disturb Eddie.

If it's even Eddie, he corrects himself. A storm of emotions swirls in Richie. Conflicted relief and utter, grieved bewilderment.

He's grateful when Bill and Bev take Eddie upstairs to get him out of his wet clothes. Ben rummages around the lost and found and washes an adequate replacement outfit. Richie sees him walking down the stairs minutes after with shoes in a plastic bag--the ones Richie threw up on.

It gets him chuckling again and Mike shakes his head.

“What the hell, Mike,” Richie finally sighs. “Tell me I'm dreaming.”

"I wish," he replies. His brow is furrowed in concentration. Mike must be wracking his brain for some nugget of knowledge buried in the recesses of Derry's library that could help illuminate their situation. "It is Eddie."

He says it so surely a dreadful hope starts creeping into Richie. "Yeah?"

"It's really him. Not as he was now, but--then. 1989."

"Mike," Richie pleads, voice thin.

Mike sighs. "We need to be careful. We don't know what this is. Or where he came from. Or how he's here." Richie hears him loud and clear. This doesn't mean anything about *their* Eddie and where he might be. Maybe not at the bottom of a well. Maybe not dead.

Seeing that sleeping face reminds Richie of the boy he fell in love with. Preserved in the moment Richie *realized* he loved him. But then he was going to die and no one would find out, so it was okay. How can he confront it now, when he's only just allowed himself to admit it?

It's like he's falling again, suspended in the moment he loses his balance. Stuck.

Bill and Ben come down together. Bill grabs a swig whiskey from behind the bar. Mike chuckles when he sits next to him, squeezing a hand on his knee. Richie's eye twitches, breaks away when Ben sits beside him.

"He didn't eat my f-f-face," Bill assures Richie.

"A shame. Could've been a vast improvement," Richie offers his coffee to Ben, who gratefully downs half of it.

"He's still out cold," Ben reports.

Bev files down the stairs last, her footsteps soft on old carpet. She sits on the armrest of the couch, Ben's hand just on her thigh. "I'll keep an eye on him--but we should talk first. I'll let you all know when he wakes up."

“Or unhinges its jaw,” Richie offers, unhelpfully chomping at the air. This earns him bemused and worried glances. Despite Mike’s assurance, he states, “That thing isn’t fucking Eddie. Eddie was--”

Throat tight, chest burning, Bev pushes on for him, “He was grown when we...”

“This isn’t It,” Mike states. That does nothing to ease Richie’s concerns. “It’s gone, undeniably. This is... something else. It’s not a creature, or something in disguise. It’s like this is... a different *version* of Eddie.”

“If this is r-really E--Eddie,” Bill starts, testing the waters, “Then where did he come fr-from?” He looks to Mike for the answers.

“Going off that assumption, from wherever this Eddie was--from the exact moment.”

“Like... the past?” Bev asks quietly.

Mike looks to Richie, somehow expecting him to fill in--and Richie does, letting his memory take over the gaps.

“He was wearing when we went into the house for the first time, that summer,” Richie swallows, eyes darting to his shoes. “What I remember, anyway. Before he got his cast. Bill, you and I got separated from him by three doors. When we got him back...” He looked to Bill. “We were on either side of him. Pennywise was... coming closer. Everyone was screaming. Eddie wouldn’t shut up, he thought we were gonna die.”

“We all did,” Ben murmurs. The group quiets, recalling the memory in their own time, all leading to the image of Bev striking It through the skull. Richie reclaims his coffee and stews over this concept.

“So, t-time travel,” Bill says, soft and grave.

Richie snorts. “That is fucking ridiculous.”

“Is that really crazier than anything that’s already happened?” Ben asks in his gentle, curious way.

“He’s going to have a hard time believing where he is,” Mike says. “We don’t know what kind of shock *this time* could have on him. Or how his presence could affect us.”

“Aren’t there consequences and shit to this? Shouldn’t him being here fuck us up, change the past, or something crazy? Like, everything will start dissolving and shit, he’ll try and have sex with his mom after I finish wiping my--”

“The past can’t be changed.” Mike’s steely gaze chills him in place and Richie bites back a retort. “But... it can be rearranged.”

“We’ll need a little more than that, Mike,” Bev prompts. Mike meets her curiosity with a smile.

“Different cultures view time differently. Its function can change. For example, we view time linearly. But in Ancient Greece, time was viewed circularly, cyclical--no chance for redemption. Every twenty seven years, It has come back and siphoned off all our fear and fed on our flesh. We broke that cycle. Time is no longer circular.”

“I don’t quite follow,” Ben squints. “And I’m not sure how this applies.”

“In the sense there are... many powers beyond our control. It was an intergalactic demon. We needed worldly power to rearrange the cosmos of Derry to purging It, breaking this cycle. The way nature and space and matter all align is changed completely.” Bill watches Mike intently, taking in his every word, even if he doesn’t understand.

“You’re giving me a fucking headache,” Richie groans.

“I don’t want to get anyone’s hopes up,” Mike says at last. And Richie has to remember he isn’t the only one who lost Eddie--but Eddie was so much more of him than he was anyone else. “But this event ripples. It exposes other concurrent events. Eddie being here now from where he was doesn’t change our now; it changes *his* past. A break in a circle forms a line. Then the line splits. Don’t think of it as a regression--think of it as a more of a swap.”

“He’s... a dif-f-erent Eddie? That... took our Eddie’s place.”

Ben whistles, low and long. But he doesn’t seem dumbfounded. He’s taking Mike at his word. Lord knows those two have spent enough time in Derry’s library to know what they’re talking about.

Richie isn’t so convinced. “Am I the only one who thinks is a crock of shit? Just me? Bev? Bueller? Bueller?”

Mike’s gaze flits between Richie and Beverly. “There has to be a connection between then and now. Bev saw the deadlights twenty seven years ago. And you saw them now. Eddie from twenty seven years ago is here now. Our Eddie could be...”

“Dead.” Richie’s voice is stronger than he expects, only because the word is wrenched out of him. “We left him in that hellhole. Remember? Or was I the only one not on board for that?”

Bev reaches behind Ben to squeeze his shoulder. Richie jerks away, standing, and when he does it all comes tumbling out.

“This is pointless. Even if that--that *thing* is Eddie, which I don’t believe for a second, Mike already said we can’t change what happened. Eddie’s--Stan is-- look, I don’t know about you dipshits, but I don’t think any of us are qualified to start a family, though maybe our collective trauma could cancel out our own nightmarish parents--but but but whatever! When that *hobgoblin* wakes up he isn’t going to believe a word of what we’re saying, where he is, and who we are. Our best bet is to cut our losses and drop the thing off at the fucking hospital and get the hell out of Derry, like *I* was going to right after dinner because then we wouldn’t have this *crisis* on our hands because Eddie would still--still... still be... If he’s dead here, he’ll be dead there. Fuck. What the fuck difference does it make.”

Richie eventually sits back down, integrating himself back into the extended silence. Bev caresses his curly bangs back when she departs to check on Eddie. She’s struck quiet with grief and he regrets the tears in the corner of her eyes.

“Mike, you said you didn’t want to get our hopes up,” Ben sighs eventually. “Richie’s right. Why... why would young Eddie being

here make a difference?" He claps a hand on Richie's back and even though he's irritated, he allows the firm, circular pressure to calm him down again. He thinks if Eddie were here, he'd snap at Richie for being so tense, that he would give himself heart and back problems from all his slouching and shouting.

And Mike, wisdom and optimism, releases the heaviest reply. "I don't know. I just feel it. There's... hope." He scratches his nose and Bill squeezes his hand when he sniffles. Richie inhales sharply. "Maybe I'm crazy, after all that time holed up in the library. In this backwater, backwards town..."

"D-deh-definitely," Bill chuckles. "But we trust you, Mike. We'll follow your lead."

Mike's firm smile shows how much that means to him, coming from Bill. He refocuses on Richie. Without words, imparts deep empathy and pain he feels at Eddie's loss. Bev, Mike. Richie needs to remember he isn't the only one afflicted. It's hard when he seems to care much more than the rest of them.

Richie shrugs. "Sorry."

"Don't be." There's a knowing in Mike's eyes that strikes Richie with fear; his perceptive powers are too great. Luckily, there's also a great distraction to get the attention off his back. Shriill, but familiar, a voice rings out from upstairs in Bev's room.

"--friends are fucking crazy, they'll light you *up*, lady, so don't fuck with me! My mother has already contacted the authorities, you can't get away with this shit! I'm not some face on a milk carton, I know every trick in your book and you're not going to sell me overseas or harvest my organs--"

Richie has never been so glad to hear blabbering that wasn't his.

Notes for the Chapter:

this was gonna be a longer chapter but i figure it'd work better pacing wise if i split it since it's dense.
thanks all for the interest so far! im excited to see

where this goes :) if there's any glaring canon errors (book material notwithstanding) lemme know and ill see what i can do.

also changed the name (wildfire--->kaleidoscope was more fitting) and tweaked the summary

3. fused

Summary for the Chapter:

Eddie looks confused, scared, but his face is searching Richie's for something specific. He seems to find it; something dawns on him that changes his entire demeanor.

"Richie?" Eddie says.

"Eddie," he replies. He tries a smile but it falls flat.

Eddie is standing on the bed in jean shorts and a rumpled shirt Ben got from the lost and found, shifting back and forth, looking ready to pounce. His right arm hangs limp at his side but he's bouncing on his feet like it's fucking Street Fighter. Bev stands at the foot of the bed, slightly annoyed and mostly amused.

"I'm okay," she assures Ben, first to her side.

Eddie balls his good hand into a tight fist. "You hear me, motherfuckers? You don't scare me!"

"Back atcha," Ben shoots easily, closing the door behind him.

"He's ve-ve-very shrill," Bill chuckles.

Eddie grits his teeth and then takes a swing at Bev. Richie pulls her back in time, saving her eyes just in time. Textbook Kaspbrak--first step, blind the attacker. The familiarity makes Richie ache.

Eddie sets his sights on Bill and launches off the bed with a scream. It's hysterical. Richie tries not to laugh because he thinks it would be too easy to vomit. Bill wrestles him off his shoulders, yelping when Eddie pulls his hair. And he won't stop screaming.

Bill covers Eddie's mouth with his hand, and the kid goes from screaming to gagging. He sets him on the bed, keeping an arm gently on his shoulders, not letting him away by an inch. Richie's never been more grateful for the town house staff too complacent to ask

questions. Only when he's stilled under duress does Bill release him.

"Sorry, but you aren't going anywhere right now," Mike pulls up a chair. Eddie's eyes dart across each person, scrutinizing, furious.

Richie watches Eddie so intently that when their eyes lock he has to force himself to look away. Eddie, plucked from his lovesick memories, thrust into Richie's world in place of the Eddie ripped away from him.

"What are you going to do to me?" Eddie demands, entire body shaking with rage. He's no longer delirious with pain, but like the rest of the losers, bewildered at the situation before him. "Also, it's way past time I take my medication. If you don't let me you're going to have a medical crisis on your hands. Unless of course that's your sick, twisted plan--"

"Eddie, honey, we aren't trying to hurt you," Bev kneels on the floor, trying to placate him with a small smile. "We're here to help you. Do you remember how you got to the quarry?"

"How do you know my name?" His tone is less abrasive, but still guarded.

"I..." She looks to the group for answers and finds none, muttering *Useless men*. "I am a friend of your friend," she says. "You know Beverly?"

Eddie is alarmed. Something dark flashes across his face; the memories of all before he hit the water, trying to piece together where he was and where he is, the pain wracking his body no doubt. And then, in a hush, "I wanna go home."

Richie chokes. He remembers Eddie shaking in the corner of the house, terrified, and that whisper was all he heard over his own screaming and Bill trying to wrestle the spider creature off his face. This is that same Eddie, or Eddie is what he was, a terrified kid who can hardly breathe air with the rest of them. Sheltered too long and thrust into a too wide world.

Not sure what compels him to speak, Richie does anyway, "Hate to

break it to you, kiddo, but you can't leave."

Eddie's gaze burns into him. He holds his injured arm tighter.

"Before the quarry, let me guess--you were in the crackhouse. Fighting It." He swallows back what could be bile. "Right? Broke your arm falling through the floor."

"Crackhouse?" Eddie repeats, miffed and confused at the knowledge this stranger possesses.

"That's my name. Then, then the fucking clown came for you," Richie remembers Eddie shakily recounting Its jaw unhinging, pawing at Eddie's face, one late night in the clubhouse. Richie watched the stars through the hatch and pretended he didn't hear Eddie crying. Just squeezed his hand until the shaking stopped. "Right? Did Its little dance, tried to gobble you up--"

"Ri--Ri-- y-y-you're scaring him," Bill hisses, and allows Eddie to shrink into his side for comfort, momentary fear of contact with a stranger forgotten in the face of Richie's malevolence.

"And he would've eaten you, too, if it wasn't for--"

"Who the fuck *are you* people?" Eddie begs. Adults don't know what's wrong in Derry. They don't acknowledge it. Richie knows these interactions are contrary to all the rules Eddie's finally started to learn.

"Who the fuck are you?" Richie shoots back. "You're supposed to be--*fuck!* If anyone's gonna know what's going on, it's you! So tell me, am I right?"

"I don't know! I don't know *you!* *You* don't know *shit!*"

"Why are you being so goddamn difficult just-- *just--*"

Richie doesn't realize how badly he's shaking until Mike eases him into a chair. He buries his head in his hands and breathes deep, rib rattling breaths. "Breathe, Richie, breathe," Bev murmurs, her hands on his knees. He's glass, shattering all over. Seeing Eddie again, and like this, is so much worse. Not instilling hope, rather draining out

anything he had left. This just reminds him of what he lost.

“Does anyone want to tell me why this loser is having a panic attack?” Eddie deadpans. A distraction, deflection from his own pain. He wonders where Eddie gets that from.

“You’re a fucking loser,” Richie groans out.

“Your mom’s a loser.”

“Yeah, well *your* mom’s a loser and she gets it from me. After I fuck her. Aaalllll night long, Eds.”

“Don’t call me Eds, you disgusting--”

Mike finally snaps. “Eddie, Richie, cut it *out!*”

The room is silent. Richie slowly raises his head and once again he and Eddie stare at each other. The banter comes so easily, he couldn’t help it. His gaze darts to Mike, then back to Richie. Eddie looks confused, scared, but his face is searching Richie’s for something specific. He seems to find it; something dawns on him that changes his entire demeanor.

“Richie?” Eddie says.

“Eddie,” he replies. He tries a smile but it falls flat. Seeing this Eddie reignites the memories of his childhood romance, while making him grieve all the more for the Eddie he lost. His Eddie. Split into fragments, spread out over time. Richie spreads his hands with little applause as though to say, *Yeah, this is it, dipshit. I’m disappointed, too.*

“*Richie* Richie?” The room stays silent. “No. No way. You look... like shit.” The idea that it’s *Richie* doesn’t seem to sit well with him. His breaths get quicker, a growing frantic energy. He fiddles with his watch--must be broken, by the frustrated whine he lets out. “Okay seriously, I need my fanny pack, I have to take my--you’re just random strangers--saved my life a-and now want to kidnap me--I need my--I’m seriously having a fucking asthma attack up here--”

“Let’s wrap your arm,” Bev suggests. She tries to get Eddie to breathe slow with her, Richie too, still not at ease. “Bill, could you...?” Her

eyes drift to the door. "He probably has some extra supplies in his room."

"Uh, Ed, I mean, his room. Right." Bill nods, chancing a look at Richie. "I can-I can go."

"No, let me," Ben insists, passing a hand on both their shoulders as he leaves.

Richie tries not to let the act read so egregious. They need to take care of Eddie, and it's all his stuff--or will be in twenty seven years. But he has to bite down a protest when Ben leaves the room and takes *one two three four five* steps down the hallway to get to Eddie's room. Rifle through his stuff. Eddie hates when his stuff is rearranged. He had enough trouble with his mother invading his personal space. It seems the least they can do is to leave it alone.

Richie's head hurts.

"I need my inhaler," Eddie requests to no reply. Eddie has finally quieted, but Richie sees his eyes dart around the room and his breathing has not slowed. At least they all lack the fundamental understanding of what's happening. Eddie sneezes into his hand, a shiver wracking his body. He stretches the wrinkled shirt. "Where are my clothes? My fanny pack?" he asks.

"We didn't want you to get sick," Bev offers, thanking Ben for the first aid kit he comes back with. Eddie is bashful, quiet. "And I think your pack got lost in the lake."

"I don't like strangers touching me," he says, but lowers himself to the floor so Bev can get at his arm. "And I could've gotten way worse than hypothermia. Especially from that height. And that water's disgusting, if I even had a papercut, who knows what kind of infection--"

"I know." She raises his arm gingerly, apologizing when he winces. She watches him carefully, closely, as though he may crumble under her fingers. Richie has the same feeling. At last, after prodding him for a minute, she meets Richie's eyes. The room stills.

Richie moves out of his chair and sits beside Eddie. He doesn't feel anything when Eddie scoots away, at least, he tries not to. Ben the stud tosses Richie the inhaler and he presses it into Eddie's hand--small, unblemished by the scar of the blood oath. Unlike Richie's, it's not a matter of the scar fading. It's a matter of what's yet to come.

Bev puts a hand on his other shoulder. Ben, Mike and Bill look away. "Bite on this," Richie advises.

"Do not fucking touch me," Eddie grits out, snatching his hand away. He doesn't enact the same vengeance on Bev. It stings.

"On three?" Bev asks.

Eddie blinks. "What on three?"

Richie's hands hover nervously above the limp end of his arm. "Don't worry, It'll be quick. I did this the... last time it happened."

"Before?" Eddie whimpers. His agitation rises. "No, you didn't. No no no no *no* I, where's *Richie* Richie? I need *my* Rich... I need my friends, you don't get it your hands aren't clean I have no idea where they've been, I need to get back *home* they're in danger and I ha-- *AAHHH!*"

Richie sets the arm swiftly back into place. Eddie's sneakers upend the carpet and he wails.

"Ffffhhhh-- *uuuuuuuck*," he whines. There are tears gathering in his eyes. When this happened last, Mike had carried him out and tucked Eddie in one of their bike baskets with such care.

Richie feels cold, Eddie's wrist is cold. There's the vaguest buzz of emotion when he helps raise Eddie's hand so he can press the aspirator desperately to his lips, who is in too much pain to bother making sure it's sterile. Or ask whose it is.

"Sshh, honey, ssshhh. It's over. You did great," Bev tucks a thick, dark curl behind his ear, but her eyes meet Richie's.

"I think I'm gonna be sick," he mutters. But he doesn't budge from Eddie's side.

He's panting hard. Bill kneels in front of Eddie, phone in hand. "I know it's hard to talk right now, Eddie, so j-j-just listen. We don't know how to get you b-b-back home. You don't know how you got here. But you're not in-nnnh 1989. You're in 2016."

Eddie stares, eyes wide, wiry body tensed like a frightened animal. "What?" Bill pulls out his phone-- *what is THAT*--and takes a picture of Eddie, then shows him. Eddie stares at the frightened reflection of himself. "What is that? I can't breathe," he wheezes. The aspirator rattles. "Oh what the shit..."

Mike moves forward and gives Bill another item to brandish. It's a photo strip from the arcade, summers and summers ago. The edges are worn and sepia, now, but all the Losers are there. Richie's breath hitches at the sight of Stan.

Eddie snatches it from his grasp, hungry for the familiarity. His mouth parts in a soft *oh*, teeth gritting *he always grinds his teeth, it's loud as fuck* and Richie absorbs that into his tormented psyche that's taken painstaking care to catalog all Eddie's habits.

"We are who we say we are," Mike promises, steady amidst the emotional sea threatening to drown all the Losers. Stan's glowing face promising a safe future for them, Eddie here in front of them instead of molding at the bottom of a well.

Ben kneels beside Beverly, who wraps his arm and rubs the inlet of his wrist to calm him. He smiles thin but warm. "It's us, Eddie."

The picture falls from Eddie's hand and Richie catches it. His thumb traces the last square. Richie wishes he could return to this time, maybe even more than Eddie. Pocket knife heavy in his hand, sun-kissed dimples adjusting the glasses crooked off his nose.

Eddie brings his good hand to his face, scrunching it up, as if he could wipe away the ache written there. The real tell he's trying not to cry is his ears. They never get red unless he cries. Richie sees pinkness but there's no comfort he can provide.

He sits, back against the frame, while Bev wraps his wrist and Eddie draws into her, away from the world. There's a self deprecative jab

creeping out of that action. Richie refuses it, for the first time ever.

“How do I know you aren’t just something It made up?” The accusation draws Richie’s interest. His eyes peek out from his fingers and *when were his hands ever that small?* Not a split cuticle, no chips in the smooth enamel of his nails. Another sharp inhale. Eddie’s gaze is thick with fear.

No one speaks.

It’s Richie he goads, “Say something.”

Richie shrugs. “I’d be a lot nicer if I wasn’t real.”

Notes for the Chapter:

I gotta say writing little Eddie interacting with these grown Losers is really fun. RIP these sad sacks :/ side note we're gonna pretend bill isn't married in this fic. mad respect to olivia hussey and jess weixler as audra, but that's the way it is this time around.

I'll be posting another one shot sometime in the next week so keep an eye out for that also! Thanks for all the comments and kudos :-)

4. drift

Summary for the Chapter:

“He's here, then I mean I'm here. Where's Stanley? Is he going to show up soon? He wouldn't just leave, he's no coward. Am I not allowed to meet me because it's the future?” Richie's early deflection has only made him more anxious, it seems, and they knew they couldn't keep this conversation under wraps for long, but.

They wanted to enjoy Eddie. Just as he is. Just for a while.

Richie stares at his new palm. The scar once there faded when he dipped it in the quarry, but he knows better than to hope his trauma will wash with it. That has as little give as the red specks dotting the crack in his glasses--stubborn bits of blood still clinging on. Still reminding him of Eddie. He remembers itchy grass up to his waist, scratching wildly under his crew socks to relieve the itch. Bill's long fingers curling around glass and slicing into Richie's palm. The absolute trust he placed in those eyes when he swore to come back. He never regrets it. But he knew where he stood then. Now, his emotions are in limbo. Eddie is here, but not as he knows. And he has to confront that.

Richie made peace with his feelings, his *love*, for Eddie. But it still lives on the contingency that Eddie isn't around to see it. Richie can be miserable in silence. If he carves it into that bridge, it's tangible, it's willed into existence. Oblivion, his blessing in disguise, no longer acts as a shield. He remembers every careful stroke of his pocketknife, hand shaking with *joy*, because even if he was going to die tomorrow there would be proof he had been there. Proof he had loved Eddie, and that act proved it would last.

Seeing Eddie now has the same cold water shock of seeing him in the restaurant. Richie dumbfounded, defensive, and starting fights with barely a teenager as a result. Forget the catastrophe uniting him. Much less concerning are the cosmic ramifications of Eddie's

presence. The idea of a parallel universe, of *time travel* no less, and what it means for their world, pales in comparison to Eddie himself. Eddie in the dim red light in plain clothes with the plainest, saddest face and brown eyes that lit up his whole being alive when they locked on Richie.

Richie needs a drink.

He spends an hour at the bar with Mike, comfortable silence and hushed small talk. From the other room, Richie spies argument. Eddie pacing back and forth, and the three bees (Beverly, Bill and Ben in that order) watching him run the clock.

Richie was known as *the mouth*, but Eddie was a real chatterbox. Eddie always had something to say, something to gripe about, something to lecture them all on, to flex his knowledge or stress their safety. He didn't care what anyone else thought. Richie was quiet to save himself and threw in comments and jokes wildly, hoping any of them would stick. He spoke to let people know how *desperately* he needed them to care. Eddie spoke to let people know how little that mattered.

Still suspicious, Eddie Kaspbrak needs to affirm the knowledge presented until it reaches a standard he's satisfied with. Richie knows he'll quiet once he get what he wants, but his tone is getting pitchy and frustrated the longer the conversation goes on. The bees seem equally tired, but bemused because, well, *it's Eddie* and that charm alone forgives most of his crimes.

The interrogation goes something like this, starting with a prompt from Eddie:

"What did we buy from the pharmacy to patch Ben up in the alley?"

"Huh?"

"Well, if you are Bill, you'd remember," Eddie points out. "You were there."

"You're the one who b-b-bought the stuff," Bill shrugs.

"Ah-*ha*! We didn't buy it! We stole it because we had three dollars

collectively!”

Ben frowns. “You guys didn’t pay for that stuff?” Bev laughs because of course *that’s* Ben’s hangup.

Eddie fires another inquiry. “What did Stan see when the monster came at him?” The questions are so prepared and forward, Richie has to imagine Eddie scribbling them out on a notepad and working his interrogation strategy in the bathroom mirror.

“How do you expect me to remember? It may be y-y-yesterday for you, but it was literally tw-tw-twenty seven *years* ago for me.”

“If you are who you say you are,” Eddie tsks.

“We only just got our memories back,” Ben points out. “When Mike called us, we finally remembered what had been blocked out for all that time.”

“Bullshit! I couldn’t forget any of this if I *tried*.” And the bags under his eyes indicate his honesty, but Richie thinks he’s the only one who notices the downward inflection of his voice, the sudden hunch in his shoulders. “What, Alzheimer’s doesn’t even hit you until you’re over sixty.”

Bev rubs her thumb on the inside of her left wrist, still dotted purple. “It wasn’t our choice.”

“And it wasn’t your choice to kidnap--sorry, *escort* me back here, either,” Eddie hums. “Just seems a little convenient that you can’t remember information that will prove your innocence, if you ask me.” And doesn’t he look fucking smug. So smug and delighted Richie imagines all three adults consider the ramifications of giving him a whack, a gesture intimately reserved for unnamed stand up comedians.

The food Ben ordered arrives shortly after the interrogation peters out. No one stops Eddie from inspecting the containers because after their last dinner out the extra security is a welcome measure. His meticulousness puts them at ease. Once the content has been verified, Eddie sequesters himself to the floor, playing games on Bev’s phone.

Richie watches colored grids and numbers reflect on his wide, excited eyes. He takes a moment to watch everyone in the room watch Eddie--faces soft, smiles long and sad. For minutes no one eats, afraid to dispel the melancholy of the mirage before them.

Richie clears his throat and eases his friends back to reality with a poor joke. A crotchety news anchor grunts, "Ah, the folly of American youth. More on humanity's decline in lieu of technological convenience at six. Benjamin, back to you." Ben snorts and takes a spot next to Bev. Meanwhile, Mike and Bill settle next to each other on one couch. Cute. He's gone from seventh to fifth wheel. This is considered an upgrade. Still, sitting next to Eddie isn't an option.

Richie plops the last container in front of the kid on his way back to the bar. "Chicken fried rice. Egg rolls. Eat up."

"Richie, sit," Bev insists, not keen on letting him seclude himself. It halts him, and when he meets the firm jut of her bottom lip, the fight is over. He sticks his tongue out at her, a gesture of frustrated gratitude. When Eddie finally sets Bev's phone down he observes his order. Eddie frowns, his innate sixth sense likely informing him it was Richie who knew his order, who raises his chopsticks in reply. It's not something he would forget, especially with how particular Eddie was. Is. Was?

Fuck. Worse than heartbreak, this is downright confusing.

Bev prompts Eddie tapping her socked foot on the floor next to him. He clears his throat and sits up straight, tucking his napkin into the collar of his shirt. The display of manners sets off this *twinge* of pain, like the smallest bone in his body gives way and snaps under emotional distress. "So... nice to meet you all. Again. Bev." His gaze flits across the couch. Eddie sorts them as he speaks, trying to get used to the new faces. "Mike. Bill." Mumbles *blue eyes* and his gaze passes over Richie--and his breath hitches to hear Eddie's breath hitch when he says his name, like maybe the thirteen year old Tozier that knows him might be so lucky to-- "Not Stan. No. Ben? *Ben?*"

"Don't look too impressed," Ben digs around his beef broccoli. The knowledge they've displayed solidifies for him that they are who they say they are. Again, *how* it's possible isn't the question, but *why* it's

happening. Why now. Eddie studies Richie's face for a few moments. It inspires a deep, low sadness in him. Something of Richie must be recognizable but he doesn't know what that is. He could hardly recognize himself if he bothered to look.

Then Eddie finally asks the question they have all been dreading, "Then, where's Stan? Wait, where am I?"

"Stan didn't show," Richie breaks the silence. "because he's a pussy." That brusque lie is easier than the truth and right now, no one corrects him. "And what about you? You're here, aren't you?"

"That's not what I--"

"*Ah lo siento Eduardo, no hablo ingles.*" Eddie weighs whether or not to believe his lie and if furthering the second half of his question is worth it if Richie's going to keep shooting shit. But now he's thinking of how Eddie and Stan shared so many similar sensibilities. And they're both--

Richie doesn't remember the last time he ate and he's no longer hungry.

"If we're going to do anything, first, I need a new watch and prescription refills," Eddie insists. "Mommy will kill me if she finds out I lost my refills."

Gut reaction? *Mommy* makes Richie sneer. Disgust settles on the back of his tongue for the anxiety and pale shaking her mothering had. Eddie's expressive face drawn silent, trying to balance the coercion and derision he faced on a daily basis. The most Richie could do was sling an arm over his shoulders and tear down the image of that loving (controlling) doting (humiliating) mother he desperately clung to after his father's death.

"Right, forgot about the free refills," he says instead. "With your punch card, they'll definitely still have you on file after three decades." Given how assbackwards Derry is and how much the pharmacy made off the Kaspbrak family, he wouldn't be surprised. He flicks a piece of carrot in Eddie's direction, for fun, and gets a numb joy watching him yelp and avoid it.

There's a panic in Eddie no amount of assurance can persuade. He still believes his medicine is a necessity. In the best interest of calming him down, Ben eyes the staircase and whispers to Richie, "He's still got a bunch of stuff."

"Fuck off, Haystack," Richie shakes his head.

"They're technically *his*--"

"It's not gonna fucking do anything," Richie points out. "They're acebos-play." Playing into the fantasy seed his mother planted is a bad idea. And he can't take raiding Eddie's room again. The door is too heavy to open, if Richie steps into that space, he'll choke. Lock the door and leave it where it is. Undisturbed. Peaceful. "And if they're not, you wanna get this fucker hopped up on a grown man's Prozac? It's a bad idea."

"I'm trying to help, Rich," Ben grits out.

"I know, Benny, but cool your jets."

"Was... that a joke?"

"Yes, shit for brains, and I'd appreciate a chuckle for my efforts."

"You'll have to rough it," Bev cuts across loudly, just when Eddie starts tuning in. "But you have your inhaler."

Glumly, he gives it a rattle, and the world stops when he turns it over in hand. His thumb is careful, pressing into the medical label. Richie watches him mouth the description, over and over. "So, this is mine, it's from this year. 2016," Eddie swallows, then starts to spiral. "He's here, then I mean I'm here. Where's Stanley? Is he going to show up soon? He wouldn't just leave, he's no coward. Am I not allowed to meet me because it's the future?" Richie's early deflection has only made him more anxious, it seems, and they knew they couldn't keep this conversation under wraps for long, but.

They wanted to enjoy Eddie. Just as he is. Just for a while.

In the silence, some magnetism brings Eddie back to Richie, as though he has the answers. He got that look a lot when they were

kids. Richie was always the first person Eddie looked to. For his opinion, his approval. That responsibility thudded his ribcage, threatened to dislodge the feelings he carefully held near his heart. Richie is good at hiding, but not when it comes to Eddie. Eddie tucks the aspirator in his pocket. Little fingers splay across his chest, over the heart that still beats. The same chest Richie witnessed split open today. "I'm dead, aren't I?" His warm brown eyes probe the room, and each refusal is another silent affirmation of his suspicion.

Bill comes in, gentle, but Richie only hears it. He takes off his glasses and drops his head in his other hand. Every successive word Eddie spits out digs him deeper. He imagines Bill shuffling off the couch and bending a knee to Eddie, just as he did an hour before. "We're guh-guh-gonna get you home, Eddie," Bill assures. "Back to *your* home. No matter what happens here." The same resolve that gave them matching scars and cold comfort.

"I die in Derry," Eddie breathes the truth aloud, Stan forgotten. Bev hiccups into her palm. Ben's cheeks dampen. Mike's brow furrows. Bill keeps hold of everything but a trembling lip while the hand on Eddie's shoulder remains steady. Richie thumbs the edge of his glasses lens, scrubbing at blood singular to his vision. He fits them back on in time to see a strange calm pass over a face that should hold fury. The fire damped out. It's the chill Eddie holds when going to confront his mother, each word a socked footstep, testing for a creak. It's a survival mechanism. Shutting down and shutting everything out. Richie sees through the veneer, and is alarmed when all he finally says is, "That makes sense, I guess."

No one speaks.

Eddie tugs his napkin out of his collar and delicately packs up his leftovers. "May I be excused?" His sneakers sink in thick ornate carpet. His fingers fiddle with the hem of his shorts. "I'd like to go to bed." His request is for Bev. No one wants to shunt this responsibility off on her, but she nods kindly at Eddie, a thin smile to mean *It's okay*. Whatever will make Eddie feel safe. They know Eddie hates being coddled. But he was so *gone* and now he's so *little* it's all Richie can do not to lock him away somewhere small and safe, a dark corner tucked away from the horrific glare of Derry, the gleam of unconcerned, bigoted citizens, from Pennywise's huge maw

swallowing him into that too bright future. In that darkness, Richie almost thinks Sonia Kaspbrak was onto something.

That leaves him gagging on the sidewalk. He stops abruptly when Bill rushes out, hand bracing the doorknob, perhaps expecting to find Richie's car speeding off, leaving dust and vomit in his wake. He hasn't even eaten enough to throw anything up. So Richie and Bill huddle outside the inn, the former perched on the hood of his car and trying in vain to light a dusty cigarette he dug out of the glove box.

Bill refuses and it strikes a familiar chord. Richie has trouble with his lighter trying to place the sensation. It flickers blue and orange and dim smoke drifts up from the must of their woodsy haven. "I remember--we were smoking in the clubhouse and you wanted to try it but it made your stutter ten times worse." Takes a long drag and huffs out, "It's not doing too good right now, either."

The writer snorts, fond at the image. "Yeah. I don't know, man. Being here d-d-doesn't do me any favors for old habits." He watches the dim glow of ash dangling between Richie's fingers. "Remember when Eddie tried?"

"God, yeah. He was a wreck."

"Y-y-yeah but you were teasing him and he'd h-h-had enough so he *had* to--"

"I didn't want to *make* him, I didn't want to hurt him," Richie finally says. "Just push him, let him live a little."

"Mhm. He was guh-grateful for that, Rich." No one else trusted Eddie like Richie did. No one pushed him like Richie did. No one *believed* in him like Richie did. Richie believe in things Eddie couldn't bring to think about himself. That he was brave, that he was strong, that he could try something without *dying*. Sensing a shift in mood, Bill steers back to their memories, "It was a b-b-big day for him, huh? Finally a real deh-degenerate. He kept alternating his inhaler and th-th-the joint--" Richie slaps his knee and cackles. It's the first time he's really laughed since they had dinner what days are now centuries ago. And maybe the first time he's thought about Eddie and managed not to cry.

Bill has that effect. He's a leader. Now he's leading Richie away from his pain and into comfort. If it was anyone else, he'd refuse to accept it. It's still hard to try. But Bill lets him take it easy, hand on his shoulder, pulling him back to earth when Richie starts to float away.

"So, time travel. Bullshit, right?" A shaky inhale of the humid Derry air. Sticky, coating the inside of his mouth and lungs. Puffing them up with river air stench and cicadas until they're big red balloons in Richie's chest.

"It's less important how he g-got here. It's more important why he's here."

Richie sighs a novel of orange embers into an orange sunset.

"I'm scared too, Richie," Bill translates. He brings Richie the clarity of his blue eyes and his smile melts Richie's heart.

"I just want this to be over with. The sooner we're out of Derry the better."

Bill, soft around the edges, picks a stray flannel threads. "Yeah. I w-want Mike to get out of h-here already."

"Can't imagine living in this shithole for so long." Adrian Mellon, asthmatic, weighs heavy on his chest. His worst nightmare. Terrors of going missing, a funeral for no body, slurs decorating the chalk outline of his corpse. And then everyone forgets and it goes on until the next one and still, no one bats an eye, because if you raise your eyelid you better pray to god that you know how to swim.

Mike's been swimming alone for twenty-seven years. Adrian was swept away. Richie was lucky enough to escape. Mike's been living Richie's worst nightmare his whole life. He stayed right here in Derry, he *survived*. His respect, love for Mike swells in his chest. He wishes he was brave enough to truly express this empathy. A fraction of the courage of Adrian, or his partner Don, is what Richie finds himself longing for.

Instead, he levels Bill with his glasses and prompts, "So. Mike get a look at Big Bill yet?"

Bill chokes. “Uh--uh--u-u-uh--”

Richie leers at him. “Is that a yes?”

“Y-y-you’re confused, Richie, I-I-I--”

“Stutter way more when you get nervous or embarrassed ooorrrr butterfliesinyourtummy!” Richie reaches for his ribs and Bill bats him off, still nervously laughing, until he’s red-faced and out of breath. Richie had to notice, being so starved for contact and positive representation. Across the board, love like Richie’s was met with mixed reviews.

“Beep beep, Richie. We’ll see.” Then, “You okay?”

Because if he pries any further Richie will snap at him. Or worse, come crumbling down and tell Bill everything, because he would listen, he would take it so easy, he would *accept* Richie. And that would be far too much. Far too easy after everything they’ve been through.

“It’s okay if you’re not. After G-Georgie, I...” Bill’s face clouds over. “You don’t get over something like that. Th-th-the kid at the arcade... Even Eddie. Like this. It’s... it’s all the same, a-a-and I still can’t.”

Still can’t save them. Still can’t keep promises that nothing is going to hurt them, that those shadows aren’t hiding something, that the monster under the bed isn’t real. They’re all that same little boy that buries Bill in his guilt. Bill cuts himself off and Richie claps a hand on Bill’s shoulder to keep it in before they both burst.

Richie himself has no hope for ever getting over this. And when this Eddie returns home, life will stop. In a way, he can deal with the torture now because Eddie’s *here*. It’s the absence that will kill him. Nothing Bill hasn’t thought of, Richie surmises. But nothing he can voice either. He will be okay, he is okay, gray lies to delude them. Stan killed himself. Eddie’s going to vanish again and nothing will change, the loss will only twist that much more like a claw in his gut. Digging in.

This isn’t something that anyone can recover from, Richie decides.

They're stronger together--but Stan is gone and Eddie is dead. The rest of them will follow. Less the inevitability of their own mortality; more that they can't survive without each other and if *It* killed them, did they even manage to kill *It* at all?

"I was really gonna kill you."

Bill's head shoots up from its humble position.

"When we were in Neibolt. The first time. Seeing him--Eddie--you were supposed to protect us. And he got hurt, hurt so bad, Bill. I thought I was gonna die just *watching him*... screaming his head off, he's always scared, but none of the shit he was ever scared of was really gonna hurt him and I always told him that, his mom was full of shit, but--I couldn't *do anything*."

A red stream carrying away an inhaler. Eddie falling into the quarry. Helpless from tragedy to tragedy, floating along a river of blood into oblivion.

"I had no fucking clue I could hurt this much."

Richie crushes his cigarette and all further discussion underfoot. A while passes before Bill follows him back inside.

Notes for the Chapter:

we'll be switching up the POV to eddie next chapter
sooo look forward to that :) thanks again for all the
lovely comments and kudos! yall rock my
world < 333

5. faded

Summary for the Chapter:

“Stop looking like such a fucking sadsack,” Eddie snaps, pulling the blanket over his shoulders. “It’s annoying.” He seats himself firmly on the end of the couch, defiant, daring Richie to kick him off. Richie takes the other end and props his elbow up on the armrest, putting as much distance between them as possible. Eddie fists the blanket even tighter. “And don’t fall asleep with your glasses on. You’ll break them even worse.”

Notes for the Chapter:

tw kinda vague but child abuse referenced because eddies mom is..... Like That

Silence unnerves Eddie.

Silence is a tool his mother uses against him constantly. He doesn’t know what he’s done wrong but he knows he has because every sound he makes is met with pursed lips and chilly eyes. He walks around the house in socks not because of the germs he could track in, but to keep every movement as silent as possible. To avoid detection. Every noise is an intrusion, infraction against his mother’s agenda.

Careful getting the cap off that bottle. Don’t rattle your pills. Swallow quietly.

He wonders sometimes if *silence* is the reason she hates Richie so much. Richie the Mouth. Every breath is an opportunity for a joke, jab, or snipe. Not to mention the volume at which he expunges humor.

Funny, Eddie remembers the house (not home, not since the EMTs took his dad and cleared all life and light for good) filled to the brim with noise. His dad tapping his foot, chewing pens over a crossword,

humming with Eddie in his lap. He bounced Eddie on his knee until the giggles he almost contained spilled out, raucous, unbridled laughter painting every inch of home.

Eddie tried to fill the silence but it stopped when his mother slapped his hand for humming the song his father used to on Sunday mornings, after which she wept apologies and wrapped his hand in gauze too tight. She said it gave her a headache. Dad's singing always gave her a headache, but she never complained, just pursed her lips and. Eddie tied that string taut between them, one of the last threads connecting him to his father.

That silence bears into him now, filling the whole of the inn, seeping through the cracks in the floorboards and infecting him. He would use his inhaler to calm down but that means passing his palm over the label and that reminds him that *he's going to die*.

That fact isn't necessarily what stresses him out. It's not knowing everything else. Where's his body? They had to have a funeral. Where's his mother? She would've screamed her head off at them by now for getting Eddie killed. Did It kill him? Undoubtedly. They're here on the cycle Ben found. 1989, now 2016. Eddie thinks of himself rotting in some sewer, caked in filth and drowning in greywater and almost throws up.

Eddie knows he's the one out of time. But while he's thirteen, he feels as though he's been around for as long as these older Losers, if not longer. He didn't know so much pain and emotion could fill him up, he doesn't have space for it all. Pills dilute, pills affect, pills desensitize. That's appealing when everything feels *so much* all the time.

If he takes the time to actually look at his mom's face, he notices the frown wrinkles outlining her lips and jaw, winks at the edge of her tired glasses. He thinks his dad had laugh lines.

What concerns his thoughts more than anything is Stan.

Nothing is certain. If Stan's dead, then Eddie never stood a chance. That's almost comforting except he doesn't know what happened. Pragmatic Stan, sensible Stan. He wouldn't die and if his friends were

going to Derry, he would come with, prepped and planned. Always one step ahead. Always assessing risk. Always keeping them safe. Eddie complained but Stan actually cared about safety. He took steps to placate him and keep the rest of the group from going off the rails. Well, keeping Richie from it.

Oh, and *Richie*.

Richie defying all his expectations again. Filling in every crack and stitching together every gap Eddie leaves. Maybe he leaves them *for* Richie, for that assurance he'll rush to his side like he always does (Eddie knows it's not changing. It won't change).

But Richie looks so *sad*.

Their bickering is a comfortable routine he longs for. It never stays because Richie drops off with some long, devastated look. He doesn't look at Eddie any longer than he has to. Like there's something wrong with him. Like he knows he won't find what he's looking for.

Because his Eddie's *dead*.

And this isn't Richie, *his Richie* (a phrase he barely allows himself to have) but he knows those eyes, weathered by time. The difference in Richie's eyes before and after It. The wrinkles in his forehead match the frown lines when he concentrates on a passage in class that he doesn't quite understand. His fidgety hands flicking ring and thumb together.

Eddie can see this all clearly and it scares him. In the last few days, his Richie's been looking at him like he's searching for something, too. Eddie forgets (*ignores*) what he's really looking for. He'll only look when Richie's not. Slow. Careful.

Silent.

"Eddie?"

He yelps at the intrusion. "Come in," he amends sheepishly, anxiously smoothing his clothes (stranger itchy stranger germs itchy itchy itchy). Bev has the decency not to laugh when she peeks through the door.

"Do you need anything?" Bev asks gently. "Glass of water, your leftovers?"

"No I'm fine, ma'am, thank you. I mean, Bev." He crosses his arms and because he thinks she'll take it well, "You don't need to babysit me."

"I like checking up on you," she replies. Her steady curiosity, nails curled into antique wood and eyebrows poised just so, makes Eddie wonder what she knows. Beverly was always astute. He was quick to jealousy over the hushed conversations she had with Richie, but she never had eyes for him. She smiled at Eddie, cautious support, like she knew a secret about him he had yet to uncover.

"I'm not going anywhere," he says, even though he's thought about running off. Statistically, it serves him to stay in the group. Survival percentages and all that. "And I'm not going to die, yet, or again, so." He tries to come off joking but his voice is too thin, choked.

Bev levels him with guarded sympathy. "Maybe leave the jokes to Richie, honey."

"That asshole?" Eddie snorts, flopping onto his bed. He curls socked toes into the carpet and thinks about how dense the fabric is, what could be lurking beneath tufts of yarn. Carpets are a hotbed for disease. Now he's anxious about that instead of Richie and counts it a victory. Then Stan creeps into his mind, and to keep away from morbid anxiety, he slings his uninjured hand over his face and blurts, "I think he hates me."

Bev comes in, leaving the door cracked. She passes her hand over the bedpost and watches him closely. "Richie doesn't hate you," comes after ten agonizing breath counts of eight. "He doesn't know what to feel right now."

"Because I died?"

Bev's confidence wavers and Eddie's stomach crumples when he hears the tears in her voice. "You're going to go back home," Bev murmurs. "Have a life. See all of us again, see... see things in a way that could change a lot of good things for you." The cautious lilt of

hope in her voice only makes Eddie feel worse.

“Or maybe I’ll die here too because I catch a disease that hasn’t been invented yet,” Eddie says, and he has to give up trying to be funny because that thought terrifies him.

She offers a chuckle at that and shakes her head. “Oh, god, Eddie. You really miss him, huh?” Bev knows he’s filling the silence Richie would fill as best he can. Mimicry is the sincerest form of flattery, isn’t it? And without the constant chatter of his best friend it’s *silent*.

Eddie scrunches up his face, hot, cheek stinging. “I don’t hate him, either.”

“You should tell him yourself,” Beverly insists. “But he knows. And I know, too.”

She tucks him into bed and leaves a light in the corner on. “I’m in the room on the left, okay? Just get me or Ben if you need anything.” There’s a slight flush on her cheeks when Eddie’s brows shoot up in surprise. He’s shared a bed with his friends on separate occasions but these are... *grown ups*. That *makes it* grown up. Maybe he’s overthinking. Maybe there aren’t enough rooms. Maybe they all have to take turns sharing. Maybe Richie and Eddie shared a room and a--

He shrinks under the covers of his giant bed, for once feeling his gangly limbs are too small. Longing for the history of a body he’s never had. He wonders if was tall. If he’ll ever get there.

“I need my sleeping pills,” Eddie barely says. It seems a lot to ask--he wonders why they keep refusing his medication. He’s been having nightmares lately, sleeping on his own.

Bev, ever the sentinel, bores into his heart at the door. It’s not a threat, something idle and unbidden, “My husband used to give me sleeping pills. They didn’t help.”

Eddie shivers and, for some reason, imagines blood coated bathroom tiles.

“Stay out of the room on the end of the hall. The bathroom’s a sty.”

The light left on only serves to illuminate the darkest corners of the room. It could be lurking anywhere. *Anything* could be lurking anywhere. Cold sweat dampens the back of his neck. The flannel sheets offer no comfort.

Eddie-bear, what are you doing up so late?

He whiteknuckles the comforter. Heavy on his chest, lead on the back of his tongue.

Let me fix you something to eat.

Eddie throws off the blanket and turns all the lights on. He takes a good look at the room. One backpack with a few ugly patterned shirts spilling out. A few books at the end of the bed. Not much else. There's a baseball bat resting against the nightstand. He grips it in his good hand and ventures out into the hallway, closing the door quietly behind him.

He casts a wary glance down the end of the hall, a dark shadow cast over the oldest, heaviest door. Anxiety swells in his chest and Eddie longs for breath. Glances at Bev's door, soft light spilling onto the carpet's edge. Her perception scares him even more than old Eddie's room.

Socked feet muffle his steps down the creaky stairs. Moonlight seeps through dusty glass. His injured arm hangs limp at his side. He needs to fashion some kind of sling, these people aren't medical professionals, and he's letting his health slide enough without taking his prescriptions alone. Eddie finds himself in the common room, empty takeout containers crowding the coffee table. What joins them is a half empty bottle of amber whiskey. A figure slumbers on the couch, sitting up, glass gripped lazily over lap.

That explains the ugly shirts.

Richie, sad and tired, fucking up his back by sleeping upright on a couch. Not to mention the alcohol.

Eddie thinks of Richie joining Bev for a cigarette and that turning into two cigarettes and then a pack of cigarettes and one beer turning

into a sip of whiskey turning into empty bottles stacked up under his bed. He sets the bat on the ground with trembling hands and pulls the glass from Richie's hand, setting it on the coffee table behind him.

Richie snorts awake and Eddie stops a yell with his good hand, almost toppling backward. Richie looks as disoriented and, well, *frightened* when he meets Eddie's eyes. They stare and stare and stare some more. The boy can't breathe and needs to cycle this hyperventilation into something.

Eddie's wrapped hand trembles upward and his unbroken fingers straighten Richie's glasses.

"Keep your f-f-fuuhcking glasses on," Eddie wheezes. Thought he would have figured that out at *forty years old*. It's comforting to know he's still useless without Eddie.

"Thanks Bill," Richie snorts. His voice is deep and rough with sleep. He scratches his stubble. A painful image catches Eddie off guard: his father's shadow brushing his forehead when he kissed his head after a bedtime story. And for too many times in recent memory Eddie cannot get air into his body fast enough.

Richie's sneer melts to concern quite familiarly when he realizes Eddie isn't breathing. "I--my inhaler's--upstairspleasehelp *Ineedit*," Eddie gasps out. Richie's glasses lenses tint blue midnight. His gaze, a familiar magnetic tide.

Richie inhales slow, exhales slower. Eddie might think he's ignoring him. "Okay just take a breath in with me, Eddie? Breathe in."

"I *can't* I need my inhaler Richie pleaseplease *please--*"

"You don't need shit," Richie snaps and everything stills. He tries to rub the frown wrinkles out of his forehead. "You don't need it, I mean, I *mean it*."

Eddie has to trust him because without Richie, what else does he have? But traitorous lips part to beg again, only to find airless, empty words.

“No, no no, you’re okay Eds you’re fine and yes I know *don’t call me Eds* and *my voice isn’t that high* but just hang on and *breathe*, okay? You can do that. You can breathe, don’t shake your head, you can *breathe* by yourself I promise. Jesus anything can set you off, can’t it... Hold my hand, okay? Don’t let go, dummy. There you go. That’s a firm grip you got. Fuck ow geez, kiddo. Nice. Nice nice nice.” Richie’s palm is soft. It feels like Richie’s *now*, or his then. He keeps running his mouth and Eddie eventually floats back down to earth.

Eddie talks for his own benefit, to affirm what he knows, what he believes. Show that he’s still breathing because that’s his best measure of being alive. While Richie babbles, thumb on the inside of his wrist, he is speaking for Eddie too. Rarely speaks for himself. It always goes to someone else.

Crooked glasses and a crooked smile. Pale as anything, pretty curls framing baby cheeks. He still sees that Richie. Eddie’s breathing evens out but his head starts hurting. When he gets his lungs back he’ll shoot something back about how the recycled air of the inn is hell on his asthma.

“Hey, come on, look at it feel it. See? You’re breathing. You’re fucking breathing, dude. Feel that?” Richie thumps his own chest with his fist. “Flesh and blood. No inhaler. You’re *alive*, Eddie.” He sniffs. “Your liver’s working overtime, but you’re alive.”

“It’s my *lungs*, dumbass. *Your* liver’s gotta be working double time if you’re falling asleep drinking fucking whiskey.” He’s glad he doesn’t have to look at Richie, only hears the laugh that huffs through his nose, traces the white line scarring his palm in a perfect arc. “Somehow you’ve gotten dumber even with seventy years on me. Dumber than I know you, and you’re pretty fucking dumb.”

“Guess I’m not smarter than a fifth grader,” Richie raises an eyebrow expectantly and then sighs. “That’s gonna be really funny in 2007. Just you fuckin’ wait.” He bends his head and watches Eddie draw the arc of his scar. That brings concern and he straightens his back, tries to separate. Richie always deflects and draws away.

Eddie does--not know why.

“You should get to bed, bucko.”

He summons enough courage to lie to Richie’s face. “I can’t sleep ‘cause your room stinks.”

“You sure it’s not your own breath wafting back in your face?” Eddie fights a smile and knows he’s lost.

Richie stands and stretches, thin blanket falling off where it bunched up at his waist. He drops it on Eddie’s head and laughs while he fumbles with it. When Eddie finds his way out of the knit maze, Richie is taking him in with the deepest sadness. Again.

“Stop looking like such a fucking sadsack,” Eddie snaps, pulling the blanket over his shoulders. “It’s annoying.” He seats himself firmly on the end of the couch, defiant, daring Richie to kick him off. Richie takes the other end and props his elbow up on the armrest, putting as much distance between them as possible. Eddie fists the blanket even tighter. “And don’t fall asleep with your glasses on. You’ll break them even worse.”

“Yes, *mommy dearest*,” Richie snorts. Resolute Eddie will remain on the couch, and when he sees Richie realize that, Eddie is too slow to stop him from downing the rest of his whiskey.

Days ago, Eddie wormed his way into the hammock with Richie, and refused to get out. Though he wouldn’t allow himself to consider *why*, that space was heaven inside their haven. Somehow, laying next to Richie, barely touching, left him warmer than possessive summer heat. He’s cold now but he still can’t stray from Richie. Across time, something still stretches between them. It’s the strongest thing Eddie’s ever felt. *Richie* is the strongest Eddie’s ever felt.

But now it’s almost drowned out by an alarming concern at how he’s (not) taking care of himself.

Everyone is concerned with taking care of Eddie, but he sees them constantly forgetting and slipping up in ways his mother rarely did. It doesn’t take much to find the bags under Bill’s eyes, the tremor in Bev’s hand when someone steps too close, the way Mike keeps glancing over his shoulder when he enters a new room. These are the

fears he saw at *home* (he doesn't know what else to call his time), but normal adults would cover up so kids didn't have to worry about them.

Derry never had normal adults. And Eddie is not a normal child. He thinks of blood staining the corner of his dad's mustache after a coughing fit. His father could not cover it with a smile any better than Richie can stop coming apart at the seams with a joke.

"Do things go back to normal after we kill It?" Eddie probes the silence. "The first time."

Richie digs his knuckles against his nose. "Never normal. But things get better." He doesn't watch Eddie look at him for a long time, then he can't decide if he's disappointed or relieved.

"I'm not going to forget this time," Eddie blurts. "I promise. I'm not going to forget you, Rich."

Richie's eyes glass up. "Don't promise me anything, Eddie."

"Will you listen to me, asshole? I won't forget... I know this time, I know the future, so *no one* is, so no one has to..."

Richie's tone is not conversational and he begs, "Just worry about you and getting home."

"But I'm already," and Eddie gets quiet because that wasn't what he thought he was going to say and Richie's face loses all color. The way Richie looks at him fills in the rest of the sentence. He tries again, wheezing, "You're here."

"*Home* home," Richie insists. And that's the end of the conversation. Silence fills the space between them but Eddie wants to reach across it with *scream*. Neither of them want to sleep, and neither of them want to give into conversation. Richie falls first. He doesn't have the stamina to keep going once he finally sits down. Eddie watches him, bundling into his blanket, wanting to fall deep in next to him. But he's out of place. Out of time. Eddie can't keep away and Richie can't bear to see him.

Eddie is going to make sure his Richie never grows up to look so sad.

And he falls asleep dreaming it.

“Get, get Eddie!”

White. Flash. Yellow. Glow.

“We can still help him, guys--we can still help him!”

Blue. An endless cavern in a bottomless well.

“We gotta get him out of here!”

Where’s here. Here is damp. Here echoes. Here hurts.

“Look at me, Eddie, look at me!”

If he could open his eyes, only.

“Eddie... ”

That’s him, he thinks. That’s his name. Fingers curl into mud, then splinter on sand. The texture of everything around him changes. Water to earth, clay hardening to stone in a universal kiln. His blood boils and his bones burn.

“You’re braver than you think. ”

That notion sparks the embers in his heart, the flickering that started thirty years ago. That fire his mother tried so hard to stamp out. The yearning that no medication could subdue. The memory that refused erasure even when the universe insisted otherwise.

This was not something that the cosmos could bind.

The brick of his vision slams back into Eddie. His head hits the structure supporting his feeble body and he gasps outright. The musk of Neibolt welcomes him back and everything sharpens around him. Light bleeds through rotted slats. An empty ceiling lengthening above him.

His head lolls. It’s there.

But Eddie's fucking got this.

It's there, head bobbing like Eddie's, because that fence post is sticking out of Its skull. Eddie drove that in, like a stake through wet grass on a soccer field. It hobbles around, limbs dangling off Its ragdoll husk. Its bugged out eyes roll back to the middle and rake over Eddie's form.

"You've come home," It hisses. *"Oh, goody..."* Dragging Itself away. Heavy breaths. *"And here I thought the fun was over... you always manage to surprise me, wheezy boy..."*

"Fuck you," Eddie laughs, even though it burns his lungs. "Loser's club is always gonna be here to kick your ass." It just grins, wider and wider, splitting skull with the fence post. The perverse spade on the end of the pole is the last thing Eddie sees before It shuffles out of sight, defeated, back into darkness. "Take that, asshole!" he screams. "We won!"

He registers a hand curled into his chest, pressing a jacket into a wound that bothers him less and less. Eddie's hand squeezes back. That pressure grounds him back to reality. The world colors itself back in and everything returns. Richie, valiantly fighting for his life, protecting him. Slipping in and out of consciousness as they fight It. The last remnants of the monster fading away now. And all that's left to do is *leave*. Leave and enact Eddie's bravest stunt to date. Richie himself said it, and Eddie can finally believe him. *Come on, Eds*, he tells himself, *you can do this*.

"Richie, we did it. We did it, buddy!" He turns to his friend with the biggest grin, filling the hole in his chest. "Shoulda seen your fucking face... You'll have to retire your 'Your Mom Joke' license. Ha! Turn in your badge, Rich, hehe... maybe *I* should write your material!"

Richie does not laugh.

His glasses are askew, slipping off his nose, a habit from his childhood. It always unnerved Eddie when that happened. He could only handle Richie's magnified eyes projected through those thick frames, diluting the dark pupils that focused with all intensity and intention on Eddie.

Eddie reaches his muddy hand out to steady them and Richie jerks back.

“Richie,” Eddie croaks. He’s lost his bravado, the euphoria of It’s defeat is deflating.

“Eddie,” Richie breathes without triumph. His pupils are blown, his glasses don’t fit quite right. His face is softer, rounder, *younger* than he ever remembers and by the time Eddie realizes this isn’t some trick of the light he’s deeply troubled and wishing for his inhaler again.

“Rich--” he tries again but his breath is gone out of him. Six other sets of eyes zone in on him.

“Wuh-wuh-what,” Bill whimpers beside him, chin trembling.

Ben groans, almost doubling over.

Mike tears up, “Where’s...?”

Bev chokes out, “Eddie. Eddie, Eddie, *Eddie--*”

Eddie hears him before he sees him and that’s enough to stop his breath entirely. “Richie get *back* get *away* Richie--!” Stan is bathed in golden light fighting through the broken windows of the house. Slender and curly-haired, trembling harder than anyone, but rushing forward to pull his friends away.

“Stan,” Eddie says, and he cries. “*Stanley*. Am I dead, Stan? Did we kill It... for real?” If Stanley’s here, then it’s over. It’s the heaven he doesn’t deserve. Fuck. This is it. This may be what Eddie deserves being a coward but he really though he’d killed it. They weren’t supposed to always be taking care of Eddie, he didn’t deserve it. Stan was never supposed to be a casualty.

“What are,” Stan is dragging Richie back by his shirt and Richie’s starting to *scream where’s Eddie where is he where IS HE Stan help*, “What are you--”

“Stanley I’m sorry, Stan, I’m so fucking sorry--” And Eddie is reaching out and the children are *screaming* trying to get Stanley back but

Eddie is desperately faster. He closes the distance and brings him into the tightest hug he can muster. Tiny fists pound his back and pull his arms and tear his hair and Eddie knows he deserves it. Despite it, he holds onto Stan, his last chance to say goodbye. Tears are streaming down their faces, Richie looks so scared--of him. It's always been so much easier for Eddie to be a coward.

Eddie's arms are braced on Stan's so small shoulders and nothing moves him. He waits for reckoning. He waits for light. For dark. For Pennywise's stretched grin telling him he lost. For Richie to wave goodbye. For anything. For nothing.

Their hands fall on Eddie like water on glass. And when Stan goes limp in his arms Eddie realizes he's not waking up from this.

Notes for the Chapter:

a longer, juicier chapter to reward the wait.
there's..... a lot about eddie i want to get out in
this fic. mostly movie canon but regardless,
[my_city_now.jpeg]

6. decay

Summary for the Chapter:

Eddie drops the magazine and runs after him, tugging on his hands and wrists to pull him back. The man hisses and shoves him off, unimpeded. "Richie, run!" Eddie begs. He makes it to Richie's side and tries to pull him down another aisle. The man matches their step and Eddie screams, desperate. "Don't let him hurt--"

"Richie, get away from that thing!"

"What?"

Notes for the Chapter:

warning for suicide imagery/mention, internalized homophobia, regular homophobia + insinuated pedophilia (vague mention of homophobic rhetoric conflating gay people as pedophiles Thanks 80s), it's movie/book typical but still pretty intense so pls take care of yourselves.

"Eddie?"

Eddie comes awake to a palm on the side of his head. It is warm, heavy. There's a thumb at his jaw and fingertips running in his hair. Scratching slow across his scalp. Eddie gives a full shudder.

Time to float.

The back of his neck tingles. Hot air balloons his cheeks. His head presses back into aching wood.

A damp cavern, endless in all directions. His shoes are wet. It's the last thing he'll remember.

"Hey, sleepyhead."

I'll blow you for free.

Pus slick fingers stretching towards him. A thick black tongue. Claws spread across his open mouth.

Come back here!

Eddie almost rolls off the couch how fast he sits up. He pants hard, batting wildly at his hair to rid it of all traces of touch. "Eddie, it's me, suh-suh- *sorry* ," comes Bill's rushed apology. "You're okay, it's just m-me."

"Bill?" Eddie blinks weighted lids, trying to wake. "Where's... what..." Images crowd Eddie's mind. A damp cavern. The humidity of the house on Neibolt. The leper's flesh oozing all over the sandy streets. At last, it calms to nothing but vague unease. "Richie," is all that comes out. "Where's Richie."

"B-Bev made him go take a shower," Bill answers. His hands hover, concerned, unsure until they land on his own lap.

Eddie ducks his head to mask his disappointment, even if he's glad to hear Richie's cleaning up. Bill's changed out of his muddied clothes and wears crisp jeans and flannel over a fresh blue shirt. Bill smiles and Eddie's breath quickens. He wants to respond but his mouth is dry. The blanket feels too constricting suddenly and he pushes it off and sits as carefully and naturally as possible.

"I didn't mean to scare you. How does br-br-breakfast sound?" Bill radiates the guidance Eddie remembers. His cheeks are dimpled, like his youth. Bill doesn't look like he slept but that doesn't stop him from checking in on Eddie. Bill was always looking out for everyone else. Eddie felt so comfortable at his side, leaning into his shoulder, close behind. Bill's gentle smile coaxes him out of his shell and soothes his worries.

Devotion. True, utter devotion. And seeing Bill now, still soft and strong, renders him to his leadership again. Eddie rubs sleep from his eyes and nods, not trusting his voice.

Bill calls to the other room, "Another plate of your fluffiest eggs,

Mikey!" Mike delivers and Eddie finds himself starving despite his upsetting sleep. Bill takes one bite and groans. "How is this so guh-guh-goddamn good?"

"That's a secret, Billy," Mike chides, sitting beside him with a mug of steaming coffee. "You work on a farm, you respect every animal and every part of the animal. Besides, beats leftover chow mein for breakfast." Mike goes on and Eddie watches Bill listen intently, hanging onto every word.

Bill, the leader, the encouragement that strung them together. He zeroes his focus in until you feel like you're the only person in the world that matters to him. The same way Richie always zoned in on Eddie and Eddie denying that gaze reciprocation.

There's something too tender, too intent between Bill and Mike now. Just like Eddie and Richie then. Eddie is dimly aware of the privacy their closeness and long gazes strike. The eggs shimmy their way down his throat. A hand burns into his calf, swung over the side of the hammock. When Bill squeezes Mike's shoulder, Eddie leaves his plate on the coffee table. He stands abruptly, but doesn't know where to go. "Eddie?" Bill inquires. His hand stays, thumb rubbing small circles into Mike's collarbone. He doesn't think Bill notices. But *Eddie* does and it's all he can think about.

No pills, no mommy. Nothing to dilute this--"Gotta--go to the pharmacy," he finishes lamely.

"Not by yourself?" Mike calls after him. His severity stops Eddie in his tracks. Knowing, kind, coaxing Eddie back. Nothing has happened but Eddie's heart is pounding, the vague feeling of being watched pricking the back of his neck, seeing the leper limp towards him through tall grass.

That's not--that's *different* --his mind supplies him with these coordinated images and knocks him quiet.

There's no leper.

He feels oppressive stained glass light burning the back of his neck. Church brick walls closing in. Mommy's nails in his shoulder.

Mike and Bill aren't doing anything wrong. Aren't even doing anything. It's nothing.

Richie's hands on his face.

It's nothing.

And if he thinks longer than that, it turns into *something*, burning low in his gut, bubbling up into his lungs and choking him, taking him over entirely. No, there's air there, but he can't breathe that, he can't let himself, can't can't *can't*—

Eddie runs out of the kitchen and into the foyer, caught between the front door and the landing window when he sees Bev at the top of the stairs. She looks rested, curly red hair frizzing below her chin. There's something about her Eddie always felt he missed, what he could see when Ben, Bill looked at her. Or the way Eddie thought Richie... Richie. Wet curls damp to his forehead, cracked glasses tucked in his shirt pocket. Bev has one hand in Richie's palm, squeezing, and the other on his cheek. They're standing close. Richie's smiling, for real, the corners of his mouth aren't strained the same way when he talks to Eddie. They're talking low, a conversation not meant for prying ears.

Richie looks concerned at his palm, tilting Bev's, brow creased. She purses her lips and for a minute, an hour, while they stare at each other's hands. Then Bev presses a chaste kiss to Richie's cheek.

Eddie's nausea boils into anger and he wants to *throw something*.

He settles for stomping his sneaker on the bottom step and demands, "I want to get out of here." Richie and Bev turn, startled, neither having the nerve to look embarrassed. Shame on them, *Eddie's* embarrassed. Embarrassed and *something*.

"Sure, Eddie," Bev says easily. "Richie, you take him."

"Sure," Richie parrots.

"I need a sling," Eddie supplies. This excuse needs to sound good to no one but himself.

"I don't care," Richie waves him off with a hand.

"And we need to refill my prescriptions." His inhaler was useless last night. The deflecting adults leave an itch--what else isn't going to work? Mommy and pills are fading out and he promises himself it's only because of temporal chaos.

"Whatever. Let me get my jacket."

"Bill, Mike," Bev calls, and Ben emerges from his room at the same time. They join Eddie at the foot of the stairs, and Eddie again notices the distance everyone assigns him in their interactions. He's used to being left out, and they aren't *his* Losers, but all of them should be, from every time, any iteration. His hand itches. It hurts.

Bev raises her left palm, splaying it open. The same thin line Richie's had. The group quiets.

"I noticed it last night," Richie rejoins, shuffling a gray hoodie over his shoulders. Eddie traced that same line until his lungs kicked in. "Probably something to do with Eddie being here, that's all."

Ben clenches fingers around the scar. "If it's back, doesn't that mean *It's back?*"

Bill shakes his head, trying to keep things calm. "We killed It. Mike said s-so."

"If time is out of whack, isn't that a reasonable conclusion?" Richie asks, and Eddie thought he couldn't drain anymore color from his face. The adults all gather at the bottom of the staircase around Eddie, but don't involve him, anything above a soft whisper deemed too harsh. Mike remains silent. It's too telling.

"Bill, you're stuttering," Bev murmurs, ominous, face twisted in regret once the words leave her mouth.

"Let's not jump to conclusions," Mike urges, the expert on damage control.

And Eddie wants them to stop. Stop looking so *old*, not forty but *ancient* with pain and worry and all the stuff he was sure they would

leave behind once they grew up and got out of Derry. It isn't fair they're still hurting, and hurting so *badly*. "I want to get out of here," Eddie repeats, stamping his foot again for emphasis. A distraction. Childish, he has the advantage. For a minute, the terror they're used to is forgotten again. For a minute, it's another summer.

Riot time fades to September chill and Eddie wishes he grabbed his own jacket when he sees Richie bury his hands in the pockets of a soft, gray sweatshirt. They walk in silence through downtown Derry, crowded with carnival activities. Everyone seems rabid and unnatural, filled with a frenzied excitement Eddie can't grasp.

He watches familiar landmarks decay against the slanted streets of Derry. The arcade, the shiver that teases Richie when they walk by. Everything is preserved as when Eddie left, but the little changes startle him with a wave of dizzy paranoia. "You tried to spend the whole summer there," Eddie tries, reaching for conversation.

"Yeah, well. Better than spending it with a kid-eating clown." Richie gnashes his teeth in Eddie's direction. The two share an uncomfortable laugh.

"Yeah. Why spend it there when you could spend it with Bev." It comes out more bitter than Eddie meant. Eddie hadn't meant for it to come out at all. But Richie was bad for his filter.

Richie's eyebrows shoot up over his glasses. "What?"

"I saw you two." Eddie toes a crack in the sidewalk. "On the staircase. She kissed you."

"On my cheek, you little perv."

"Have *you* kissed *her*?" Richie laughs. "I'm fucking serious, Rich, I can't believe an asshole like you could land someone as nice as Bev." Nice, because Bev is. Again, Eddie remembers how Bill and Ben stared at her, soaking in her rays. He shields himself from the sun, can't handle being blinded.

"Yeah, Eddie, we locked lips in the clubhouse about a million years ago. My charm broke down her feminine walls, and she relented to

my masculine musk at last—” He doesn’t remember anything Richie says after that. Eddie tries to take it as a joke but each word numbs him further. Only that they stop outside the pharmacy and Richie asks him *four times* if he’s okay.

Mommy would approve, he thinks. Mommy knew *that dirty boy* and *that filthy girl* would end up together. He gnaws the inside of his cheek until he tastes blood. That’s something mommy doesn’t notice. Something dirty inside him that no one but Eddie can see.

“Shut up.” For mommy. “Fucking weirdo, everything is fine,” Eddie mumbles.

“Are you upset about me and Bev? Don’t be.” Richie’s hands twist in his pockets through the thin gray fabric. “You probably have a crush on her, huh, Eds? *Eddie’s in loooooove...* Ha, whatever, you can still shoot your shot, you little devil. Me, on the other hand... I could never be with Bev. I’d just hurt her sensitive, fragile heart with my womanizing ways.” He fans a hand over his heart to cover the clench in his jaw. It’s funny, the same way everything Richie hides he turns into a joke.

Eddie’s gotten good at noticing that.

“Besides, I’ve gotta stay true to my one and only, Sonia Kasp—”

“Beep beep, Richie.”

“There he is!” Eddie dodges the hand that tries to ruffle his hair. “So, a sling, Hello Kitty watch... I’ll be back in a minute, anything else I can retrieve for you, my liege?”

“You aren’t getting me a Hello-fucking-Kitty watch and I’m coming in with you. You want to leave a child unsupervised in this shithole? Have you learned *nothing*?” Eddie tries to remain positive without implying the staircase conversation. Richie chews his lip, silent, and after silent debate he opens the door for Eddie. Eddie stares at unfamiliar products on the shelves while Richie goes up to the counter to talk to a weather Mr. Keene. Eddie keeps his head down, but still feels that glassed over gaze chilling him.

He trains his gaze to outside the shop, watching people roam the streets unsuspecting. A little girl races to catch up to his parents, an animated grin lighting her red face. Two men walk side by side, arms brushing, branded in Derry merch. A curly-haired man stands at the street corner, waiting for the light to change even though there aren't any cars. He shivers.

Richie is in a heated argument with Mr. Keene that Eddie shuts out with a *Birds&Blooms* magazine. He settles in a creaky chair just as the bell rings and the man from the street strides in, out of breath. The pharmacist's assistant informs him in a nasally tone that she's on break. The pharmacist is engaged with Richie. Eddie watches him weigh his options over glossy pages.

To his annoyance, the man approaches him. "Hey, kid, you live around here, right?" Eddie flips through his magazine in response, trying hard to keep interested. "I just need directions. I'm looking for a restaurant."

The man is pale, fatigued, as though he's run a great distance, but no flush to show. Eddie runs through a list of symptoms in his head and tries to place the man's condition, all the while sinking lower in his chair. He watches Mr. Keene go to the back. Richie taps the counter impatiently.

Eddie ignores his question and advises, "You should ask Mr. Keene. Also, you should drink some water. You're dehydrated." The man considers his advice but doesn't stop shaking. He's rooted to his spot, intensely fixed on Eddie.

"What are you reading?"

Eddie thumbs a double spread, a murder of crows taking flight from one page to the next, and opens it flat for display. Something compels him to stay still, not alarm the man with sudden movement. He doesn't even bother to call for Richie, ten feet back. The aisles seem to stretch forever, Richie getting farther away.

Finally, he slaps the magazine closed. "I don't know where the restaurant is. You should ask Mr. Keene."

The man thumbs his stubble. Eddie notices pinpricks decorating his chin and jawline, and writes them off as shaving knicks. "He's still here, huh..." Eddie slinks out of his chair, clutching the magazine tight, trying to sneak past the man as he mutters to himself. He's halfway down the aisle to Richie when the man calls, "How'd you break your arm, kid?"

Eddie freezes. Any minute, he's going to start decaying, Eddie thinks. The flesh on his hands will start dripping on the floor. His teeth will rot together. He'll slobber for Eddie's bony limbs. "It was an accident," Eddie whimpers. He scratches his cheek with his good hand. What's here that he can use as a weapon? All he's got is Richie, so far away.

"Bad fall?" The man's hands shake, fingers spread. He could launch forward and grab Eddie, but the way his eyes dart to the door makes Eddie think he's scared, too.

He keeps backing up, not tearing his eyes off the man, hoping he'll hit Richie sooner or later. "Hey, I-I think we should get out of here," Eddie croaks.

"You're not leaving," the man assures, manic. But he's *terrified*, why is he terrified when *Eddie* is terrified?

"Mr. Keene's gonna be back any second," Richie waves over his shoulder.

The fluorescent light wavers. The glass windows tint, shrouding the man in darkness. Eddie raises his voice, hoping to catch his attention, "Richie, I really think we should get out of here right fucking *now*!"

"Don't piss your shorts, you were the one that wanted out so bad!" Richie laughs as he turns around and when he sees Eddie it promptly dies. The man catches Richie and stares. The light flickers. He takes the opportunity to blow past Eddie and heads straight for Richie.

Eddie drops the magazine and runs after him, tugging on his hands and wrists to pull him back. The man hisses and shoves him off, unimpeded. "Richie, run!" Eddie begs. He makes it to Richie's side and tries to pull him down another aisle. The man matches their step

and Eddie screams, desperate. “Don’t let him hurt--”

“Richie, get *away* from that thing!”

“What?” Eddie and Richie echo.

The man glances around and settles on a windshield wiper, brandishing it as a weapon. “It can’t hurt you, Richie,” the man insists. His hands are shaking. “Okay? It’s not real. Not real.” Curls his hands around the hilt, barely audible, “*Not real.*”

Eddie watches Richie watch the man, the wheels of his mind turning. He doesn’t seem to understand this apparition’s threat. Instead, there’s cautious hope. There’s a tenderness there reserved for his friends left in the townhouse.

“Rich, listen to me,” the man implores. “This’ll hurt me a lot more than it’ll hurt him.”

Richie throws himself forward and bats the windshield wiper away so fast it’s almost comical. He grabs the man’s shoulders and shoves him against a wall of shelves. Merchandise rattles and hits the floor. The two men stare at each other. Eddie wonders momentarily why he considered this shaking man a threat. Thin, stalking as the leper.

“Richie,” he whispers. His gaunt face strains and against Richie, looks younger and sweeter.

“Piece of shit,” Richie grunts and shakes him. “You fucking ditched us. Stanley, you--fucking *idiot*, Stanley is it you? Is this really you? Are you fucking here, man, ‘cause I kicked your head around like a hockey puck and I’ll do it again--”

Stan sobs and paws Richie’s curls, pressing their heads together so desperately it looks *violent*. He only says Richie’s name, beyond reason, beyond capacity. His cardigan sleeves fall bunch up and expose the bandages trapping his wrists.

“You’re a fucking *coward* and you came back were you seriously gonna beat the shit out of a tween? With a *windshield* wiper? If you weren’t such a shit wimp I’d almost be impressed. Stan the Man, Stan the motherfucking *Man!*”

“Rich, that *thing*--”

“It’s Eddie.” The surety in his voice quiets Stan instantly. Richie brings something serious when he talks about Eddie, as to quiet all doubts. He stares at Eddie *again*, which Eddie is getting sick of.

He says, “You’re supposed to be dead.”

Stan actually laughs. “Yeah. I have a feeling you aren’t supposed to be here, either.” And the twinkle in his eyes makes Eddie think, *Maybe we’ll get to stay*. “Have to say, Eddie, you haven’t changed.”

“Stan,” Richie says. “I’m the funny one. Cut it out.” Then, to Eddie’s shock, his eyes burst with tears. “Shit, Stan...” And barrels his head into Stan’s shoulder. And Eddie watches everything that led up to Derry between Stan’s eyes and Richie’s shoulders. The phone call. The terror in remembering. Waiting for Stan in the restaurant and realizing he was never going to show.

But now he’s here. He’s *home*.

And Richie is crying and clinging to Stan and he thinks he’s only ever seen Richie like this a handful of times and this Richie could be *his*, could be the boy curled on his bedspread silent save sobs and grasping Eddie’s hand like it’s the only thing keeping him here. It’s certainly all keeping Eddie there. It’s the only time since his dad left the house felt home.

Eddie wants home. It’s his aching heart and burning eyes and stinging cheek, wet with tears.

“Eddie,” Stan reaches a hand to him. “Eddie, are you okay?” Even though Richie is breaking down in front of them and Stan’s wrists are snug in bandages.

“Yeah, I’m--it’s whatever, my allergies are killing me,” he wipes his cheek with the back of his hand and winces. He sees the back of his hand and pales. Blood, hot on his knuckles, washing away freckles.

“Eds?” Richie peels himself out of Stan’s embrace and shouts, kneeling down to him. “Eds, holy shit, what did you *do*?”

"I didn't--hurt you, did I?" Stan panics and suddenly he's a boy again, curls of gold falling over his brow. "I didn't mean to--"

"You didn't even touch me," Eddie snaps. It takes him a long moment to let Richie touch the sleeve of his hoodie to Eddie's cheek. "That's so fucking unsanitary, we're *in* a pharmacy, can't you at least get some gauze--"

Richie stares at his cheek and something dawns on him. He looks back to the counter where Keene still has yet to appear. "We've gotta get out of here," he says. He wipes and wipes at Eddie's cheek but blood keeps flowing steadily. Suddenly, it wells up in his mouth, and he spits it out on the ground, disgusted.

"What's happening?" Eddie whimpered. "I'm gonna be sick, I'm gonna be fucking sick, Rich--"

"Stan, we gotta go, *now*," Richie insists. He gives up stemming the flow of blood (dark, so dark, it's always darker than Eddie thinks blood should be). He throws an arm around Stan's shoulders and takes Eddie by the hand. He leads them to the front of the pharmacy and Eddie keeps looking back, expecting something grotesque behind them. The dark glassy doors and windows face them, ominous slate rock. Intricately it begins to crack. One line at a time, scratching a message into the glass. "Fuck, fuck, *fuck*," Richie hisses and Stan shrinks into his side, gaze glassy and unfocused. "Stan, door, can you do that? Stanny, Stan, I need you to focus!"

Eddie doesn't wait and runs for the knob, desperately trying to push the door open. "It's locked!"

"Eds, get back here," Richie demands. "You're gonna get hurt!"

"Richie you shit-for-brains I already *am*! You're not my fucking mom, I *know* how to fight this piece of shit and I don't need you fucking choking me every five seconds--" Blood flows down his cheek and into his mouth and he tries not to choke on it. When kicking the door doesn't work, he resorts to throwing a chair and screaming.

"I know you don't!" Richie yells. "But you're a fucking kid and I can't fucking lose you *again*, Eddie!" His body heaves with a great sob and

he bends over, winded. The store seems to quiet around them. Richie covers his face with his hands and inhales to get his bearings. Richie, holding onto him while the world crashed towards them. Pennywise limping forward and Eddie disappearing into Richie's arms. Just feeling those hands pressed to his face, keeping him safe, present--

Loved.

Stan groans to the present and Eddie just watches Richie fall apart, sinking into the hard tiles. "Richie, the glass..." Eddie breaks away from the door to read what's written, spiderwebbing across the entire display window. The lights above them flicker again, dimming low. Everything shatters around him. Stan, the picture of steady certainty, shivering with blood damp wrists. Richie, trying to wheeze laughter and only squeezing out tears. Eddie turns to read the glass spelling their doom.

RUN GIRLY BOY

I'LL HAVE YOU

BOTH OF YOU

"*R plus E sitting in a tree...*" The chilling voice echoes as though the pharmacy was a cavern. "*D-Y-I-N-G...*"

"Doesn't work with the rhyme scheme!" Stan yells shrilly. Then one of the shelves tips and *falls*, slamming into the next shelf and the next shelf. Stan yanks Richie to his feet and out of the way just in time. Eddie cowers against the door, shielding himself from glass and merchandise.

"The door," Eddie almost sobs, unsure who he's speaking to. "It's not opening!"

The glass splits with a grin, yellow eyes beaming and flooding the pharmacy with light.

"E plus D equals F-A-G!"

Stan covers his ears too late. The world reduces to faint buzzing, those words ringing louder and louder in Eddie's head. And Eddie

wonders, if this is meant to scare him or Richie more, because he sees Richie's mouth fall open, lips vibrating with a scream. He grabs a chair and throws it through the front window, shattering the glass entirely. The shards bleed into the carpet, a red marsh beneath their feet. Richie is still screaming, just kicking upturned shelves and tearing magazines apart.

"Richie," Eddie thinks he says. "Richie, please--"

Mike and Bill sitting next to each other on the couch. Pills litter the pharmacy floor. Eddie tumbling into the hammock with Richie. His mother locking the car door and speeding away. A wet goodbye pressed into his neck. His cheek still bleeds freely and he sees Richie in the cistern. Blue and hysterical. Eddie blinks back to the present. Stan's hands drop to his shoulders and hug Eddie tight. The bathtub, dark, blood swirling down the drain.

"You naughty boys aren't supposed to be here," It hisses. Eddie grips Stan's hands. His knuckles are white. *"If you don't play by the rules, neither will I. RULE ONE: Boys don't touch boys."*

"Don't listen to him, Eddie," Stan implores. Tears fall on top of his head.

"What do you think Richie will do to you, now that he's lost his Eddie ?" It giggles, conspiratory, right in Eddie's ear. A hand burns onto his face and he screams when blood smears across his whole face. Richie keens and falls down again, grappling fallen shelves for support. *"He could do ANYTHING to you, Eddie-bear..."*

"Shut up shut up shut up," Eddie whispers. He takes a step. Pills crunch under his feet, oozing black shit and smoke. "You're not real. I'm not scared of you."

"You were screaming in my arms, Eddie," It hisses. Eddie thinks he sees it slinking up from behind the shelves. *"Do you think Richie wanted you to--"*

"Shut up!" Eddie screams. He runs to Richie, who recoils when he gets close. "Rich, you idiot, it's me. It's *me* ." He throws his arms around Richie's neck and Richie tries to shake him off. "Rich, it's me. It's

Eddie. I'm not going anywhere. I know you wouldn't hurt me, Richie, I know you, I *know* ... I know it's scary but please don't be scared. I'm not scared of you. I'm not."

And he sees the clown slink into view, pulling itself to full height, hair brushing the ceiling. He guffaws, the force of it knocking his torso sideways. "*Oh Eddie, you were always such a brave little boy. What a waste...*"

Slowly, Richie's arms wind around Eddie, protective and strong. Those hands on his shoulders, his back--the tenderness Eddie recognizes as his Richie. A different body, a different age, but through whatever madness and whatever time, *his*.

Eddie suddenly understands the hands on his face in Neibolt.

Loved.

Between the two of them, they force themselves upward. A hand joining their shoulders again, Stan, behind them, supporting them. And Eddie's known Stan for so long and is suddenly struck with the fact that Stan *died*, that they lost him forever. The little boy in the scout uniform. And Eddie feels old, but *Richie*.

Richie lost it all.

"*Mommy thinks you're just like Daddy,*" Pennywise whispers. "*Dirty like daddy and dirty like--*"

"Can you shut up for five fucking seconds, asshole?" Eddie revels in the comfort of their embrace and drowns him out. "It doesn't matter what world or time we're from. We're always going to save each other. There's always going to be seven of us kicking your ugly ass! All fucking seven of us! *Every fucking time!*"

Pennywise stutters back, grin lopsided. *All seven of us loving each other and caring for each other and saving each other*, swelling Eddie's heart and filling between his ribs with hope. "*Do you really think you can do it by yourself, wheeeeeeezy?*" Pennywise coughs dramatically to mock him, but his face contorts in anger.

"Did you hear what he said, numbnuts?" Richie shouts. His hand is

tears and her hands tremble. She looks to Bill for guidance, who's still buzzing with furious energy.

"Georgie," he says. "Th-th-that's our concern. He c-c-can come if he w-w-wants."

"Are you fucking crazy, Billy?" Richie snaps. "It's your *fucking fault* Eddie is *gone* in the first place!" And he launches himself at Bill and Bill punches him, *hard*. Eddie is aware this isn't something he's supposed to see. Something he's never seen. Richie's breakdown after Eddie's near death experience that threw the group into chaos. They almost never spoke again. And Eddie remembers Richie fading in the cistern, screaming his lungs out. How much worse off is it, he wonders, with Eddie *gone*. Richie is screaming himself hoarse, kicking through old furniture and broken boards. Stan pulls him back, grounds him, but it also takes Mike to restrain him. Bill is resolute and unashamed. Eddie sees that same cold, hardened look in his eyes that lead to his saddened adult demeanor. Bill is resolute to a fault--and won't allow himself any levity. He's so thoroughly convinced Georgie's death is his fault.

Earlier, Stan eventually unwound himself from Eddie's embrace to stare into his deep brown eyes. He's doing the same now, even with Richie restrained. And something unbidden and understanding breaks through.

His attention turns to Ben, swaying in place. "Ben is fucking bleeding out, are we really going to fight about this?" Eddie snaps. Being here with their younger counterparts doesn't give him distance, rather, launches him back to a time where Bill punching Richie was almost enough to keep him from talking to Bill ever again.

Everyone stops, not expecting him to speak.

"Come on, Haystack, let's get you patched up again," Eddie says. He isn't *that much* taller than the children, to his annoyance, but he still leads Ben out in his arms and doesn't look to see if the others will follow. He patches him up in the front yard of Neibolt because he still has his fanny pack on him, somehow, despite the thrashing he received from Pennywise. The kids watch him in silence, responding only when asked, either too entranced or too frightened to run away.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” Eddie suggests, helping Ben to his feet. “... The quarry. My mom’s going to start looking around soon.” And who knows how he’s going to handle that. Eddie doesn’t think about it, only grabs the small bike he recognizes as his own.

“Hey, that’s Eddie’s bike, dickhead. Your fat ass isn’t going to fit!” Richie’s demeanor is thrown off by the obvious tears under his glasses, and the fact that he recognized which bike was supposed to be his.

“That’s what your mom said but we make it work,” Eddie says dryly, clambering onto the bike. Bill took him back to the inn on Silver and he remembers it with a ridiculously fond smile that stretched the gauze on his cheek until he’s tearing up. Second thought: maybe ending things with Richie on a *your mom* joke wasn’t tactful, but if he said anything else he just might fall apart.

Again, Eddie doesn’t wait for them to follow. Just awkwardly pedals towards the setting sun and listens to squeak of oil thirsty bikes. He thinks of Richie, watching him plainly, the magnitude of every interaction they shared lost on him. Muscle memory drives him forward. The pain in his chest is fading and the hole in his face stitching itself back together, flesh undisturbed.

Stan rides beside him. They share a glance. *I believe you*, he says. *I don’t have a reason but I have to trust you*. Stan, curly hair and dimples, younger than Eddie ever remembered. This is the only way he’s ever remembered him.

I’m going to save you, he thinks. *I’m going to save all of you*.

Maybe Eddie will offer himself the same courtesy.

Notes for the Chapter:

hi! life's been crazy so i had to put updates on hold.
hope this extra long chapter makes it worth the wait!
we'll have more extended adult eddie POV soon :-)
thanks for reading as always <33